Spring 2003

EDUCATION next

A JOURNAL OF OPINION AND RESEARCH

Our Schools and Our Future

Is the tide of mediocrity still rising?

THE MEMBERS OF THE KORET TASK FORCE ON K–12 EDUCATION

IN THIS ISSUE:

Why the Status Quo Wins, Achievement Trends, Ignoring Choice, The Teaching Wars, Accountability Unplugged, Lincoln's Values

CONTRIBUTORS: MILTON GOLDBERG, PATRICIA GRAHAM, JAMES HUNT JR., LISA KEEGAN, DIANE RAVITCH, E. D. HIRSCH JR., CAROLINE HOXBY, TERRY MOE

SPECIAL ISSUE: Twenty years after *A Nation at Risk*

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OUTSIDE THE BOX

Prizes for Excellence in Education

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation proudly announces its inaugural Prizes for Excellence in Education. These annual awards (each of which bears a grant of $25,000) recognize and honor distinguished scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who have advanced the cause of education reform in America.

The 2003 Fordham Prize for Distinguished Scholarship

is given to a scholar who has made major contributions to education reform via research, analysis, and successful engagement in the war of ideas. In 2003, this prize is shared by two outstanding analysts:

Anthony Bryk – professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. Bryk's accomplishments include groundbreaking theoretical work on multilevel statistical modeling. His analyses have shown that when inner-city students are challenged with ambitious intellectual work, their test scores rise. Bryk has also written a seminal study of Catholic schools and a provocative new book showing the crucial role that trust plays in successful schools. Besides his own influential research, Bryk founded a major center to assess and strengthen Chicago's multifarious school reform efforts, and established a charter school to improve the lives of scores of Chicago's neediest youngsters.

Paul E. Peterson – Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government and director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, whose research on school choice, governance, accountability, and the black-white achievement gap has profoundly influenced education policy in the United States. His groundbreaking analyses have helped to enable thousands of disadvantaged students to use vouchers to attend private schools. Peterson's brilliantly conceived randomized experiments with vouchers have clarified both the benefits and the shortcomings of school choice and underscored the need for more such evaluations of education reforms.

The 2003 Fordham Prize for Valor

is awarded to a leader who has made major contributions to education reform through noteworthy accomplishments at the national, state, local and/or school levels. In 2003, this prize goes to:

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. – professor emeritus at the University of Virginia and founder and chairman of the Core Knowledge Foundation, whose pathbreaking books, steadfast advocacy and personal courage in the face of fierce criticism have inspired hundreds of schools and thousands of educators in the belief that education, particularly for disadvantaged children, needs to focus on content as well as skills. Today, Core Knowledge schools are operating in almost every state and more than 1.2 million children are benefiting from a Hirsch-inspired curriculum.

The prizes will be conferred on February 20, 2003, in Washington D.C., at a symposium celebrating the immense contributions that Bryk, Hirsch and Peterson have made to the renewal of American K-12 education. A fuller description of the winners' work will be made available at that time.

Nominations for the 2004 Fordham prizes are being accepted until May 15, 2003. Please obtain further information from the Foundation's website: www.edexcellence.net

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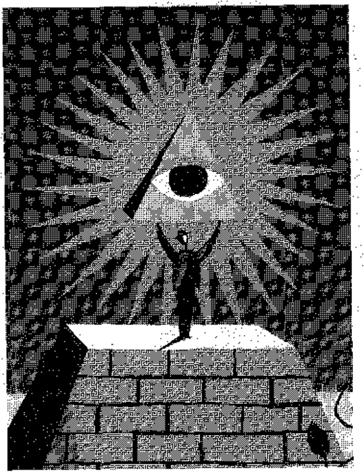

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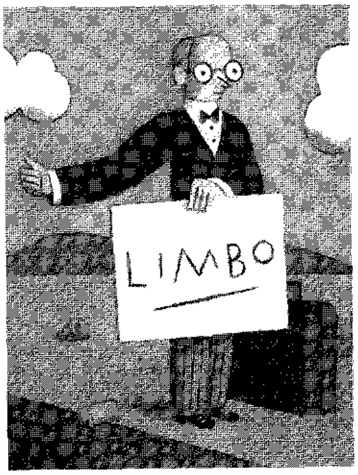

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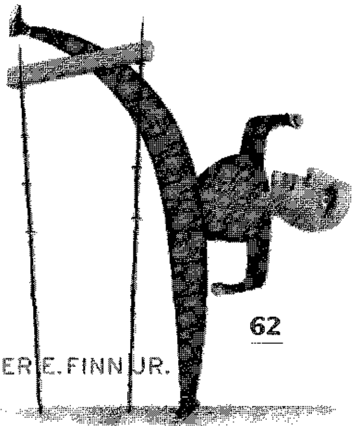
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The Erosion Continues

An education system soaked in mediocrity

In 1983, a blue-ribbon education commission appointed by Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, announced that America's "educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them." In its report, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared that the "intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people" were in danger. U.S. schools, once the envy of the world, had been overtaken by competitors abroad. In one of its most quoted phrases, the Bell commission spoke of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

> *A Nation at Risk* did a better job of diagnosis than of prescription.

At first glance, the metaphor—a rising tide of mediocrity—seems inapt, even odd. Do tides simply rise? Don't they ebb and flow? And when they flow, don't good things typically happen? Perhaps a heedless swimmer may be unpleasantly surprised, but flowing waters refresh tide pools, float boats, and enchant the child who watches surf pound against the headland.

Yet as peculiar as the metaphor first seemed, it has acquired meaning with the passage of time. As the globe warms, the slow rise in ocean levels has caused great concern. As glaciers and ice caps melt, Louisiana is losing land to the sea and barrier islands are gradually slipping beneath the watery surface, drowned by a slowly rising tide, a process suggested by the cover photo.

Mediocrity can slowly engulf our education system in this same insidious way—imperceptibly, an inch at a time, without definitive scientific proof of its causes or consequences. Vested interests can deny it. The media can ignore it. Scholars can try to document it, even if never to everyone's satisfaction. The public can sense it, but not quite understand what to do about it.

Today, on the 20th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, the **Koret Task Force on K–12 Education** finds the tide of mediocrity still rising. At a time when America needs greater intellectual, moral, and technological strength than ever before, the nation's education system remains well behind those of the high-performing countries of East Asia and much of Europe. Far from stemming the tide, the recommendations of the national commission were only selectively adopted, leading to reforms more symbolic than substantive, say the 11 members of the Hoover Institution–based Koret group (who also serve as editors and editorial board members of this journal).

The issue begins with a condensed version of the Koret Task Force report (the full-length version is available at www.educationnext.org as well as from the Hoover Institution). The Koret group argues that the famed 1983 report did a better job of diagnosis than of prescription. It focused on the right issue—educational excellence—but provided an inadequate set of solutions. The commission thought higher expectations, more time in school, and more money for education could stop the rising tide. Not so, says the Task Force, calling instead for systemic change that will hold schools accountable, give parents more choices, and provide citizens with a transparent education system whose accomplishments they can assess. Only if these systemic changes are realized will the public find it worthwhile to invest more resources in our country's schools.

This issue's forum spotlights four commentaries on the Koret report. **Milton Goldberg**, the executive director of the 1983 commission, defends its work as ahead of its time. Former North Carolina governor **Jim Hunt** detects more progress than the Koret group finds. **Patricia Graham**, former dean of Harvard's education school, sees the problem as rooted more in society than in its schools and calls for as much emphasis on equity as on excellence. Former Arizona schools superintendent **Lisa Graham Keegan** says the Koret recommendations will not mean much unless backed by strong educational leadership.

Following the forum are feature articles by individual members of the Koret Task Force. Their essays provide detailed assessments that support the argument stated in the main report. Given the importance, timeliness, and urgency of the topic, we have devoted nearly all of this issue to these essays. However, we also invite you to read our book reviews and enjoy our last page, which, in this month of presidential birthdays, provides a thought-provoking account by **William Miller** of the moral and educational development of our nation's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln. —THE EDITORS

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

NINTH EMERSON PRIZES TO BE AWARDED IN MEMPHIS

Sudbury, Massachusetts—The ninth annual Ralph Waldo Emerson Prizes for student work of outstanding academic promise at the secondary level will be awarded this Spring to Rachel Hines of Olney, Maryland (now at the University of Maryland), Jessica Leight of Northampton, Massachusetts (now at Yale), Chrystan Maria Skefos of Memphis, Tennessee (now at Rice), and Robert Patrick Vance, Jr. of New Orleans, Louisiana (now at the University of Pennsylvania) according to Will Fitzhugh, Editor and Publisher of *The Concord Review* [**http://www.tcr.org**].

The awards will be hosted by the Cliosophic Society, the National History Club chapter at St. Mary's Episcopal School in Memphis, Tennessee in the evening on Saturday, April 5, 2003. The prize research papers are on the journal's website.

Each Emerson Prize laureate will receive a check for $3,000, and a copy of David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Truman*, along with the letter of award. Past Emerson awards have gone to high school students from Czechoslovakia, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Florida, California, Tennessee, Vermont, New Zealand, Utah, Massachusetts, Russia, Washington State, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Illinois, Japan, and New York.

Founded in 1987, *The Concord Review*, the first and only quarterly journal in the world for the academic work of secondary students, has published 52 issues with 572 essays (average 5,000 words) by students of history in forty-two states and thirty-three other countries. These exemplary essays have been distributed to subscribers throughout the United States and in thirty-two other countries.

Diane Ravitch, Senior Research Scholar at New York University and former Assistant Secretary of Education, has said: "*The Concord Review* provides a splendid forum for the best student work in history. It deserves the support of everyone in the country who cares about improving the study of history in the schools."

The AFT responds

The American Federation of Teachers' report *Do Charter Schools Measure Up?* has been sharply criticized by special-interest groups advocating on behalf of charter schools. In "Lobbying in Disguise" (*Check the Facts*, Winter 2003), Robert Maranto joins this discordant chorus. But Maranto and the AFT agree on a number of points:

✦ Charter schools are no panacea, and legitimate concerns exist about the effectiveness of for-profit education.

✦ Charter schools generally do not cream off brighter students.

✦ The achievement of students in charter schools has not lived up to expectations.

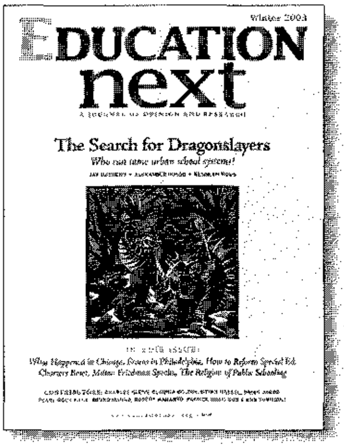
✦ Charter schools are not hothouses of innovation. Instead, they modify and disseminate existing reform practices to a greater degree than other public schools.

✦ Charter schools employ many inexperienced teachers at pay that is competitive with other public schools. However, senior charter school teachers often are paid less than their public school counterparts. Virtually all are at-will employees.

✦ Charter schools are somewhat more likely to use merit pay, although the practice is fairly limited. Most use a traditional salary schedule.

The AFT report states that charter schools do spend less money than other public schools. However, Maranto implies that we think charter schools are underfunded. In fact, the AFT study finds "general funding comparability," even though charter schools receive less funding for facilities. Public schools spend more than charter schools because public schools do more. School districts bear higher costs for special education, low-income students, transportation, and food services, as well as activities not typically found in charter schools, such as community outreach, services to private schools, and adult education.

Despite our many areas of agreement regarding charter schools, three fundamental differences remain.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The Search for Dragonslayers
Who can tame urban school systems?

First, the evidence does not suggest that parental choice and market competition necessarily lead to improved student achievement. In November 2002 the Texas Education Agency ordered the shutdown of five charter schools (all open for at least three years), citing persistent low academic performance. Despite the poor track record of these schools, large numbers of students were still enrolled.

Second, the AFT does not believe that parental satisfaction surveys are a substitute for student achievement. Surveys do not include the large number of families who leave charter schools—some of whom are presumably dissatisfied. Furthermore, as the surveys performed by Phi Delta Kappa reveal, parents consistently give high ratings to the public schools their children attend.

Third, Maranto is not persuaded by the research cited in our report showing that charter schools have had only a limited competitive effect on other public schools. Yet in "Small Districts in Big Trouble: How Four Arizona School Systems Responded to Charter Competition," a study cited in the AFT report, Maranto and his colleagues found "that market competition varies depending on local environments." Our review of the research revealed few examples of charter schools' having an impact on districts that could be attributed to market forces.

Finally, we are attacked for our recommendation that policymakers "should not expand charter school activities until more convincing evidence of their effectiveness and viability is presented." Is this an extreme position taken because of union politics? We don't think so. It doesn't differ from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's decision, regarding its investment of more than $1 million in charter schools in Dayton, Ohio, to shift "our efforts from starting charter schools to ensuring that they are effective. We intend to develop outside services that will help struggling schools improve their business management operations, their delivery of special education, and, we hope, their academic results."

JOAN BARATZ-SNOWDEN
JOAN DEVLIN
American Federation of Teachers
Washington, D.C.

Robert Maranto responds: Alas, the AFT still seems to be spinning the facts. They cite the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in support of their proposed moratorium on the opening of new charter schools, yet the foundation strongly favors further national expansion of charter schools. There is a world of difference between one organization's decisions to focus on its existing investments and a decision to place a nationwide moratorium on the opening of new schools. In fact, foundation president Chester E. Finn Jr. wrote that the AFT's report "reeks of error, distortion, and untruth about charter schools."

Further belying the AFT's logic is the fact that 18 percent of Dayton public school children now attend charters, about 15 times the national average. Would the AFT agree that charter growth should slow only when they enroll 18 percent of Ameri-

the
Accreditation
game

can public school students?

The AFT seems to have misinterpreted my own work. My team of researchers did in fact find that "market competition varies depending on local environments." But this is a long way from saying that charters have had no effect. The point was that competition was most effective in areas where a fair number of charter schools had sprouted up. Arizona school districts where a significant number of children left for charter schools responded with leadership changes and other attempts to draw students back to the district.

Whether charters are hothouses of innovation depends on definitions. If innovation means inventing something never before seen on Earth, then few schools of any kind innovate. Yet charters do make "innovative" options available to parents who want them. Montessori education is 100 years old, yet public school officials have told me that "not in 100 years" will my local school system (which spends more than $19,000 per child) offer a Montessori option—it's too innovative for us. I wish I had a charter option!

NCATE responds

Sandra Vergari and Frederick M. Hess ("The Accreditation Game," *Feature*, Fall 2002) make some inaccurate claims about the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). They are simply mistaken in saying that NCATE's standards are "mainly input driven." NCATE's standards focus on results. Does the teacher know his or her subject matter, and can the teacher teach effectively? That is the evidence that NCATE demands of its accredited institutions.

The authors question "whether any form of accreditation is useful or appropriate in a context of widespread disagreement about what skills, dispositions, and methods are essential to good teaching." But there can never be consensus about the one right way to teach a unique group of individuals. Vergari and Hess mention discipline, desk arrangement, spelling and grammar, and other areas where "one best way" has not been decided. Let's hope it never will be! Children are individuals, and individuals learn differently. Some strategies work with some children better than with others—hence, different outcomes with different children. The competent teacher, with a base of knowledge about teaching and learning, makes the decision about what works best with her group of students.

Nothing suggests teachers should be prepared differently from other professionals.

Common sense and experience indicate that there is nothing unique about teaching that suggests its practitioners should be prepared differently from other licensed professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants, and pilots. Teachers should know how children learn, should be aware of the available research in their specialties, and should be able to apply that research to their practice.

Vergari and Hess also deride the largest national study ever done on teachers' qualifications, completed in 1999 by the Educational Testing Service. The study examined the Praxis II scores of 270,000 test takers and found that 91 percent of graduates of NCATE-accredited institutions pass state licensing exams across the nation—18 percentage points higher than graduates of non-NCATE institutions. These are exams of *subject matter knowledge*, proving that content knowledge is at the top of the agenda at NCATE-accredited institutions. ETS concluded, "NCATE-accredited institutions appear to increase the likelihood that candidates will meet state licensing requirements."

Arthur E. Wise
President, NCATE
Washington, D.C.

School finance

There is no question that, as Michael Heise argues, the accountability and standards movement is threatened by school finance litigation ("Educational Jujitsu," *Feature*, Fall 2002). Plaintiffs in these lawsuits say they favor high standards and accountability and then point to data showing that large numbers of students in urban districts fail to meet heightened standards. Then they cite statements like "all students can meet the standards," issued by state departments of education, to support their demands for more money from the courts.

How, then, can states pursue and implement a reform agenda if they are also involved in school finance litigation? The answer is for states to vigorously defend such cases in order to avoid ceding control over education policy to plaintiffs and the courts. All too often these important cases are given little attention by states until it is too late.

These cases can be won if they are properly defended. The recent New York City school finance case is a prime example. Despite tremendous political pressure, New York governor George Pataki defended the case and ultimately prevailed at the appeals-court level (full disclosure: my firm served as co-counsel with the New York attorney general's office in the trial of the *Campaign for Fiscal Equity* lawsuit). Although the plaintiffs have appealed the decision, for now the governor and legislature have retained their ability to set education policy and to determine spending priorities. And the New York City public schools, rather than extracting and then wasting more of the taxpayers' money, may be forced to finally move beyond "lack of money" excuses and attempt to implement real, research-based reforms.

In too many places, public officials do not appreciate the stakes in school finance litigation or erroneously believe that such litigation will hasten reform efforts. Heise makes a compelling case that such litigation does not hasten reform, but hampers it.

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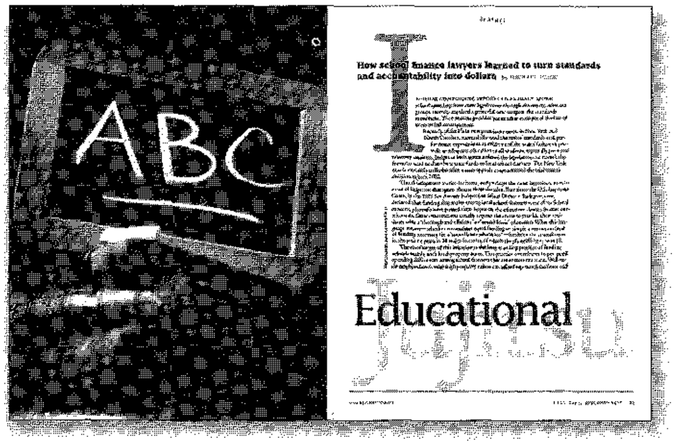


How school finance lawyers learned to turn standards and accountability into dollars

Educational Jujitsu

Social factors

David Murray's critique ("Waiting for Utopia," *Check the Facts*, Summer 2002) of scholar Richard Rothstein's writings stimulates an important question: To what degree can formal education mitigate the debilitating social and physical conditions that accompany low-income students to school?

Rothstein continually asks whether schooling is the most effective way to elevate students from poverty and launch them on a road to higher academic achievement.

Answers to this question can be tightly linked to values and, thus, heavily freighted with political rhetoric. This is the manner in which Murray has chosen to treat the topic. He attacks Rothstein's writings as though they were part of a political campaign.

Here is the broad context in which the issue can be nested. Europe has long seen fit to invest heavily in income maintenance, public housing, universal medical coverage, prenatal care, and preschool and childcare policies in an effort to compensate for deficiencies in the family and community environments of students.

The United States has opted to rely more heavily on schooling as a means for promoting individual fulfillment, enhancing social justice, and countering unearned privilege.

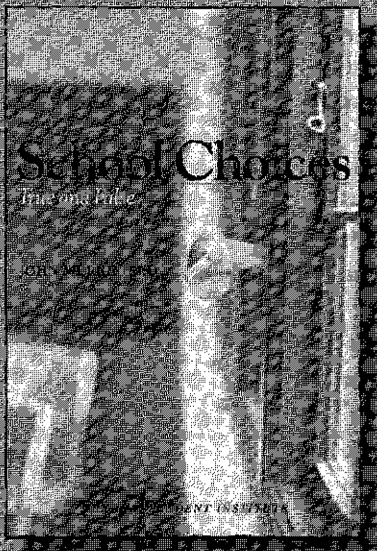
Which strategy is more effective? In western Europe, it has resulted in fewer citizens residing at the extremes of wealth and poverty. Hence, if the standard is equality, western Europe wins.

However, if greater economic dynamism, more powerful incentives for creativity, cultural innovation, greater opportunity for material comfort, greater acceptance of diversity, and greater personal liberty are taken as measures of societal well-being, then the United States might be better.

The United States presently spends approximately $3 billion each operating day to support its schools and colleges. On an annualized basis, this is more than the cost of America's national defense.

If, under the best of conditions, schools are still incapable of adding anything but a few fractions of a standard deviation to the academic achievement of students or to their lifetime earning trajectories, might it not make sense to freeze school spending and explore supplementary policy instruments? Might it not make sense to focus on other social interventions that might have a more powerful effect on students' cognitive skills?

JAMES W. GUTHRIE
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee



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True and False

BY JOHN MERRIFIELD

Professor of Economics, University of Texas at San Antonio

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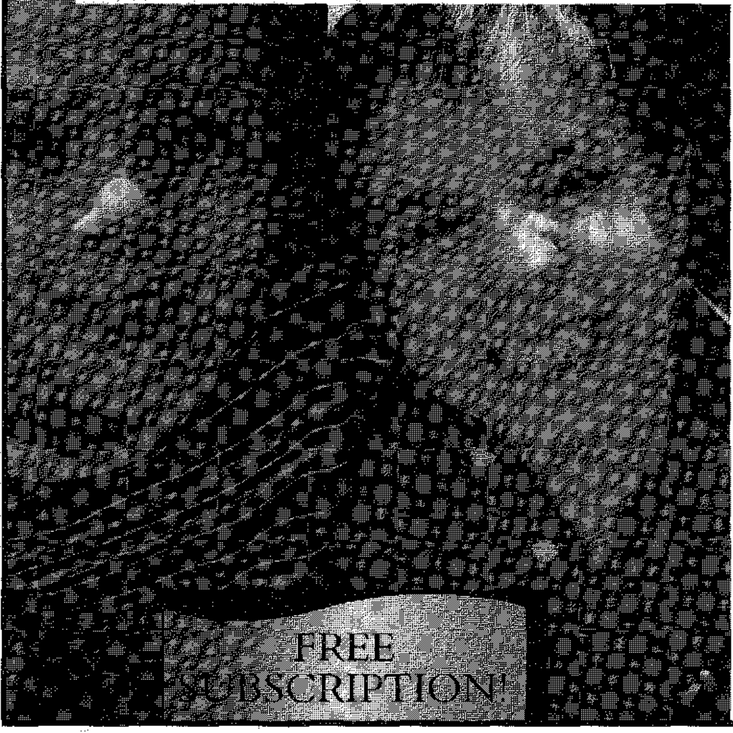
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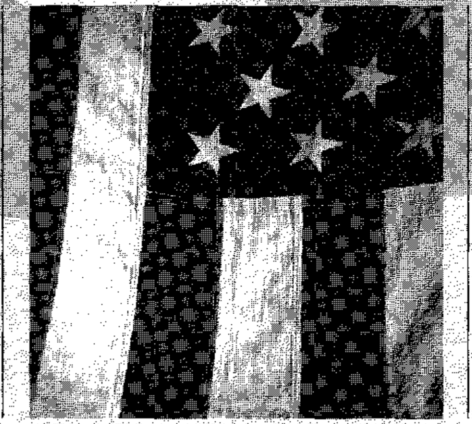

9 *A Report* by the members of the KORET TASK FORCE on K–12 education

JOHN E. CHUBB, WILLIAMSON M. EVERS, CHESTER E. FINN JR.,
ERIC A. HANUSHEK, PAUL T. HILL, E. D. HIRSCH JR., CAROLINE M. HOXBY,
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A *Nation at Risk* underestimated the resistance to change from the organized interests of the K–12 public education system.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered a thunderbolt in the form of a report called *A Nation at Risk*. *Risk* awakened millions of Americans to a crisis in the nation's system of primary and secondary education. That system did not suddenly crash in the early 1980s. The declines and shortcomings so starkly set forth in *A Nation at Risk* had been accumulating for many years. But until the commission documented and framed them as a grave problem in urgent need of attention, many Americans—especially those within the field of education—had supposed that the schools were doing an adequate job.

The commission called an abrupt halt to this smug contentment. It admonished the nation in forceful, martial language that America faced a threat to its national security and economic vitality. Not since the late 1950s, when Sputnik raised the possibility that the Soviet Union was surpassing us in science and mathematics, had there been such alarm over the weakness of U.S. schools.

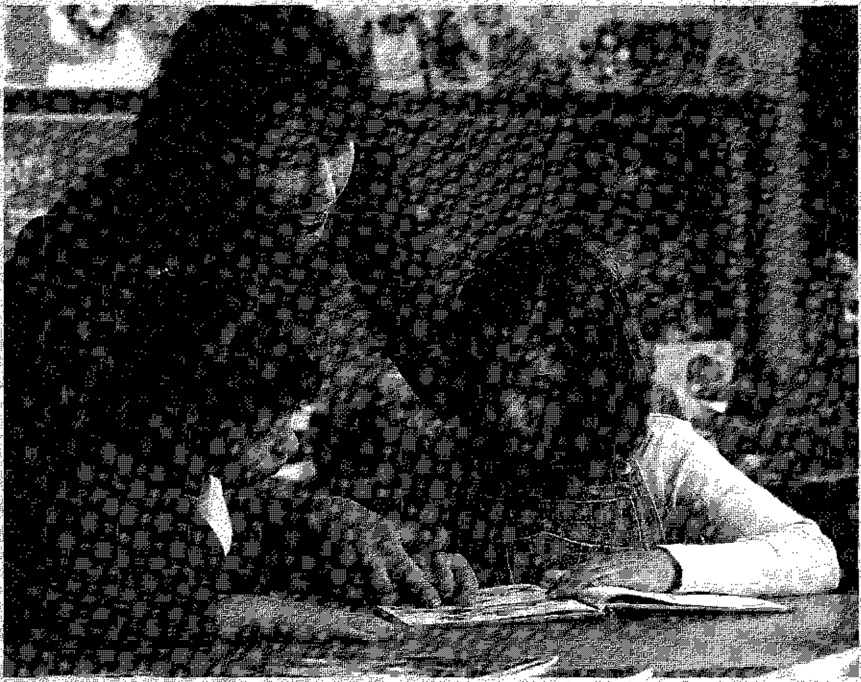
By the 1960s, however, that sense of urgency had faded and the focus of reform had turned away from academic performance. Well-intended efforts to address racial segregation, meet the needs of handicapped youngsters, compensate for disadvantage, and provide bilingual schooling for immigrants eclipsed concern about student achievement. They also produced much red tape, litigiousness, and contentious battles over means and ends. Teacher organizations, at the same time, asserted their right to bargain collectively and to strike, which brought them unprecedented power over schools and school systems. The Sputnik-inspired commitment to education quality, in other words, had clearly lost priority. SAT scores peaked in 1964 and declined thereafter, reaching their nadir about the time *Risk* was unleashed.

Twenty years following the alarm sounded by *Risk*, by contrast, the commitment to solve the problems that it documented remains keen. The commission has effectively recast many people's thinking about education from a focus on resources, services, and mindless innovation that absorbed us during the 1960s and 1970s to an emphasis on achievement that remains central today. It has laid bare the truths that equity without excellence is an empty achievement, quantity without quality an unkept promise. But while its reverberations are still being felt, solid and conclusive reforms in American primary and secondary education remain elusive.

What the Commission Said

The excellence commission organized its findings within four broad topics: content, expectations, time, and teaching. Under these headings, *Risk* issued a 24-count indictment of American primary-secondary education as the commissioners found it in 1983. The spirit of these indictments can be sensed from the following excerpts:

- "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course."
- "The amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased . . . and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining."
- "In 13 States, 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation may be electives chosen by the student. Given this freedom . . . many students opt for less demanding personal service courses, such as bachelor living."
- "A study of the school week in the United States found that some schools provided students only 17 hours of academic instruction. [In] other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend 8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year."



Students do no more homework today than they did 20 years ago, despite the recommendations of A Nation at Risk.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID SCHMIDT/MASTERFILE

- "Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students. . . . Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach those subjects. . . ."

The commission's four major recommendations did not call for sweeping reform of the education system itself, but they demanded higher standards of performance. The commission said:

- High-school graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students acquire a solid foundation in five "*new* basics": English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.

- Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.

- The amount of time students devote to learning should be significantly increased.

- The teaching profession should be strengthened by raising standards for training, entry, and professional growth.

The Response

It did not take long for *Risk*'s analysis and central findings to win acceptance among the general public, editorial writers, business leaders, governors, and other elected officials at the national, state, and local levels. Ten years following its release, commission member and Nobel Prize–winning chemist Glenn Seaborg wrote, "It is now apparent that the pre-college educational crisis and the urgent need for educational reform are broadly perceived as being a top priority." Today, 20 years after its release, nearly everyone in the United States who attends to such matters, save for a few Panglosses within the education profession, now recognizes that the commission accurately described our flagging academic performance and the insidious threat it posed to our long-term economic strength, cultural vitality, and civic competence.

But what has actually taken place in the years since *Risk* to ease the crisis? In the end, agreeing with *Risk*'s critique and finding the will to make the changes it called for turned out to be two different animals.

Familiar strategies were tried first: new programs, more money, and tighter regulations. Among the additions were some things the commission had urged, such as stiffer high-school graduation requirements, as well as many it had not—yet these add-ons produced little by way of improved educational outcomes. Test scores have remained essentially flat since 1970. Students do no more homework today than they did 20 years ago. Remediation remains the fastest-growing activity on many college campuses. Graduation rates have actually declined—less than three fourths of our young people now earn high-school diplomas, though this slippage is often masked by the suggestion that "equivalency certificates" amount to the same thing. Employers and professors remain dissatisfied with young people's readiness for work and higher education. And international assessments reveal that American 17-year-olds know far less math and science than their peers in most other modern nations.

As it became clear in the late 1980s that "more of the same" was not yielding acceptable gains, energized governors and business leaders started to make the education-reform crusade their own. They launched bolder strategies, no doubt inspired by *Risk* but often breaking new policy ground. By 1990, the country was setting national education goals, giving birth to novel school designs, breaking up big high schools, and revamping the National Assessment of Educational Progress to get better information. The first Bush administration briefly tried to create national academic standards, but the effort to do this from Washington soon fizzled. Within a few years, however, prodded by the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 program, almost every state was devising its own accountability system. By the mid-1990s, a number of innovations were also visible in the delivery of education: charter schools were spreading, vouchers were being tried, and private firms were beginning to operate public schools on an outsourced basis.

Why So Much Change Yet So Little Improvement?

First of all, the commission's diagnosis was incomplete. It paid scant attention to the K–8 years, seeing them as providing a reasonable level of basic skills, when in fact many children were failing to gain the fundamental knowledge they would need to continue learning in subsequent years.

Second, the commission was either too obtuse or too naïve to take on the basic functioning and political control of the system itself. It seemingly believed that the public education system of the day, given higher standards, better-trained teachers, and more time on task, would move the schools and their pupils toward loftier levels of performance. It trusted the system to do the right thing once that system was duly chastised and pointed in the right direction.

We now know that this was unrealistic, that the commission failed to confront essential issues of power and control. It seemed not to realize that the system lacked meaningful accountability and tangible incentives to improve, that it exhibited the characteristic flaws of a command-and-control enterprise. The commission accepted the system as it was, with all the anachronisms inherent in a polit-

The No Child Left Behind Act has long, slow timelines and imposes few real consequences on educators whose schools fail.

ical mechanism created in the mid-19th century.

We now know that powerful forces—three in particular—proved far stronger and more stubborn than the commission could have foreseen in 1983:

- *Risk* underestimated the resistance to change from the organized interests of the K–12 public education system, at the center of which were the two big teacher unions as well as school administrators, colleges of education, state bureaucracies, school boards, and many others. These groups see any changes beyond the most marginal as threats to their own jealously guarded power. Moreover, they are permanent features on the education landscape, whereas the excellence commission detonated its report and then disappeared, with no real successors to shepherd its recommendations through the political minefields.

- *Risk* underestimated the tenacity of the "thoughtworld" of the nation's colleges of education, which see themselves as owners of the nation's schools and the minds of educators, free to impose their ideas on future teachers and administrators regardless of evidence about their effectiveness. Some of the commission's own expert advisors were advocates of these ideas, in effect poisoning the report from within.

- *Risk* also underestimated the large number of Americans, particularly in middle-class suburbs, who believe that their schools are basically sound and academically successful. This misapprehension arises mainly from the dearth of honest, standards-based information from objective outside sources concerning the true performance levels of our schools, an immense data void that the commission failed to address.

In counterweight to these forces of inertia, the past two decades have also seen the development of powerful new forces for reform that should strengthen America's ability to improve its schools as we head into the future. These include:

- The public's surprisingly durable belief that education reform is one of the most critical issues facing the nation—a belief heartily shared by impatient business leaders and elected officials. Although this sense of urgency seems inconsistent with the oft-reported complacency of parents about their own child's school, satisfaction levels do not run deep. A majority of American parents believe that private schools are more effective than their children's public schools and say they would move their children if they could.

- Growing and sustained support for both standards-based and choice-based education reforms has the potential to leverage changes that are farther reaching than those the commission envisioned, though both reform strategies face staunch resistance from established education interests.

- Minority parents are increasingly angry and disenchanted with failing inner-city school systems and are less willing to listen to promises that things will get better if they continue to trust the system and drench it with resources.

Our Findings

The members of this task force have studied American education for many years. We come from several disciplines and have different interests. But we come together in unanimous support of the findings and recommendations that follow. These encompass the most important lessons we have learned about American K–12 education over the two decades since *A Nation at Risk*.

1) *U.S. education outcomes, measured in many ways, show little improvement since 1970.* The trends that alarmed the excellence commission have not been reversed. Though small gains can be seen in some areas (especially math), they amount to no more than a return to the achievement levels of 30 years ago. And while the U.S. runs in place, other nations are passing us by. In the past, we could always boast that America educates a larger proportion of its school-age children than other lands, but this is no longer true.

2) *The U.S. economy has fared well during the past two decades not because of the strong performance of its K–12 system, but thanks to a host of coping and compensating mechanisms.* These include an endlessly forgiving higher education system; the presence within the U.S. of most of the world's top universities; huge efforts at research and development; a hard-working populace and an adaptable immigration policy; a society that encourages second chances and invites new ideas; and the world's largest and best-functioning free-market economy.

3) *We've made progress in narrowing resource gaps between schools, but the achievement gaps that vex us remain nearly as wide as ever.* This is because the problems that *Risk* highlighted particularly affect schools that serve disadvantaged children. These problems have not been successfully addressed. Minority youngsters are far less apt to complete school and college, and their average academic performance is markedly lower. On some measures, minority 12th graders score about the same as white 8th graders, who themselves are not scoring well.

Across-the-board raises for all teachers, good and bad alike, do not strengthen pupil learning.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID SCHMIDT/MASTERFILE

4) *The preponderance of school reform efforts since* Risk *has concentrated on augmenting the system's resources, widening its services, and tightening its regulation of school practices.* This has not proven to be a trustworthy path to improved educational performance.

5) *Higher-quality teachers are key to improving our schools, but the proper gauge of quality is classroom effectiveness.* Across-the-board raises for all teachers, good and bad alike, do not strengthen pupil learning. And stricter regulation of teacher preparation and accreditation only creates shortages and bottlenecks that reduce the supply of capable new instructors for U.S. schools.

6) *Standards-based reforms have not achieved their full potential. Though promising, they are hard to get right.* "Accountability" has shown in several states that, when done persistently and carefully, it can boost achievement, especially among minority and disadvantaged youngsters. But states find it difficult to gain consensus on a coherent set of substantial and ambitious academic standards, to align their tests with those standards, and to get strong accountability systems working. Standards and tests are essential for parents and policymakers to identify faltering schools and gauge the effectiveness of different programs, but they do not themselves solve the problems that they illumine. Moreover, the steps taken so far in the name of "accountability" fall, for the most part, only on children, not on the adults in the system.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) may help by mobilizing federal muscle to push states and districts in the right direction. But Washington has scant leverage over states and districts. NCLB has long, slow timelines and few sanctions when states and districts do not meet them. It imposes few real consequences on educators whose schools fail. It is likely, therefore, to make the biggest difference in places that share its goals and have the greatest capacity to attain them and to accomplish least in those places—probably the neediest places—where officials may not much care or simply do not know how.

7) *Choice-based reforms have not had a fair test.* Most evidence to date suggests that they can boost student learning and parental satisfaction, but constraints have kept them from being tried in full. Opponents have hamstrung school-choice programs at every turn: fighting voucher programs in legislative chambers and courtrooms; limiting per-pupil funding so tightly that it's impractical for new schools to come into being; capping the number of charter schools; and regulating and harassing them into near conformity with conventional schools.

These barriers have kept choice-based reforms from receiving the proper trials they deserve, which is significant on two counts: first, by ensuring that only half-baked versions have been adopted, opponents have made it easier to claim that the reforms were tried but they failed; second, profound changes in a system—the kind of changes that choice would bring to bear—cannot arise overnight. Market systems, in particular, take time to develop.

8) *Americans need better, more timely information about student performance.* Currently, the only audits of the system's performance are conducted by those running the system or by organizations that depend on them for future business, including colleges of education and testing firms. As the country has recently and painfully observed in the business world, that's simply unsatisfactory.

9) *We need a thorough reform of elementary and middle schooling.* Though U.S. high schools demand attention, too, preschool and K–8 education are far from what they need to be. These are the years when children gain fundamental knowledge about their country and their world, about science and literature, about art and civics. This calls for close attention to the K–8 curriculum, as well as the curricular aspects of pre-K education, and for purposeful steps to help prepare all children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Our Recommendations

In the years since *A Nation at Risk*, the incremental changes

Fundamental changes are needed in education, changes anchored to three core principles: accountability, choice, and transparency.

that passed for "reform" have not improved schools' performance or students' achievement. We conclude that fundamental changes are needed in the incentive structures and power relationships of schooling itself. Those changes are anchored to three core principles: *accountability, choice,* and *transparency.*

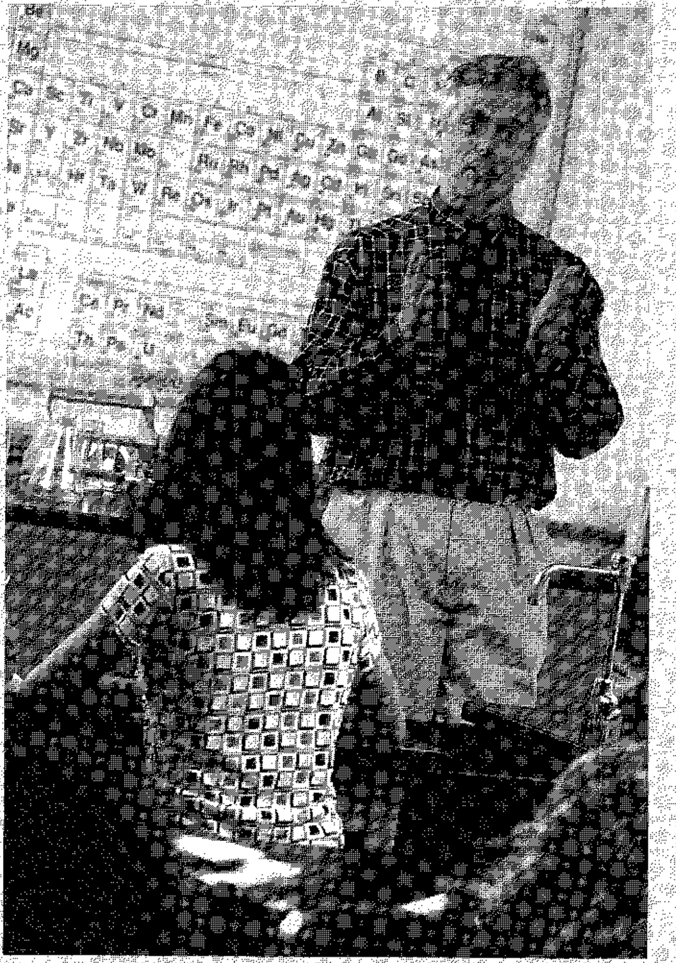
By *accountability,* we mean that every school or education provider—at least every one that accepts public dollars—should subscribe to a coherent set of rigorous, statewide academic standards, statewide assessments of student and school performance, and a statewide system of incentives and interventions tied to results. The components include:

1) *Clear goals.* Every state needs a coherent set of challenging academic standards and curricular guidelines, subject by subject and grade by grade, standards that are not confined to basic skills and the "3 R's" but that incorporate such other vital studies as history, science, geography, civics, and literature. Every state also needs a coherent and corresponding set of "proficiency" levels to be attained by all children in these subjects, levels that encompass essential knowledge as well as necessary skills.

2) *Accurate measures.* Every state needs tests and other assessments that accurately gauge the performance of individual children, schools, and school systems in relation to its standards. These assessments should form the basis for evaluating the value added by each school, and incentives should be linked to how much schools contribute to student learning.

3) *Consequences.* Every state needs an accountability system in which the consequences—both welcome and dire—fall not just on students but also on responsible adults. Success should be rewarded. Failing schools should be closed, reconstituted, taken over by other authorities, outsourced to private operators, or their students given the right—and full funding—to leave for better schools. This does not mean just to other public schools in their own district—the limp compromise Congress wrote into No Child Left Behind—but the capacity to transfer to any school, anywhere.

By *choice,* we mean that decisions made by parents rather than bureaucratic regulation should drive the education enterprise. Open competition among ideas and methods, with people free to abandon weak schools for stronger ones, is the surest way to make major progress. The education system's "clients" must be free to select other providers that teach their children more effectively and in accord with family and community priorities as well as core American values. Options include:



Performance in the classroom should be the chief determinant of whether teachers are retained and promoted.

1) *Charter schools.* Every state should give charter schools a full and fair chance to show what they can do to provide high-quality options to families. States should exempt charter schools from local district veto and numerical caps. They should provide charter schools with full per-pupil funding and capital funds to support facility costs. In turn, schools that do not add substantial academic value to their pupils—and satisfy their clients—should lose their charters and close.

2) *Voucher experiments.* While mandating that every publicly funded school should meet rigorous state content standards, every state should explore additional forms of school choice, pushing far beyond the boundaries of within-district public school choice. More states should give vouchers a proper test in selected communities, in tandem with strenuous efforts to renew the public schools of those communities.

3) *Full funding for high-risk students.* Children who pose difficult challenges to schools should, under a choice regimen, command added resources to pay for their education. Dis-

advantaged, disabled, and limited-English-proficiency pupils should carry with them substantially larger amounts of funding than "regular" students, both to make them more attractive to schools and to assist schools with the added costs of teaching them well.

4) *Teacher quality and incentives.* The principle of choice should extend to teachers and administrators as well. Training, recruitment, licensing, and compensation should be redesigned to offer wider opportunities for able, willing individuals. A person who is knowledgeable in a subject should be given a chance to teach it, with actual classroom effectiveness then used as the primary gauge of competence. Performance in the classroom should be the chief determinant of whether teachers are retained and promoted. Teachers in scarce fields should be paid more than those in oversupplied fields. And teachers and administrators who take on challenging assignments should be paid more than teachers who opt for easier situations.

By *transparency*, we mean that those who seek complete information about a school or school system (not including personal information about individuals) should readily be able to get it. This information should be provided in forms and formats that enable users to easily compare one school, system, or state with the next. Measurement and information systems need to be developed to provide full transparency throughout public education. Though the primary burden of transparency rests on individual schools, school systems, and states, Washington also bears a responsibility. America is overdue for a thorough upgrading of federal education data gathering and analysis, primarily housed at the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as needed strengthening and expansion of—and enhanced independence for—the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Accountability, choice, and transparency are the essential trinity of principles by which to reconstruct America's schools. Each must be in place for the others to work. In combination, they transform the education system's priorities, power relationships, and incentive structures.

Accountability means that all participants in the education system—the child, the teacher, the school and district leader—know what they must produce by way of results, how they will be measured, and what will happen if they do or do not attain the desired results.

Choice brings freedom, diversity, and innovation to how education is provided, who provides it, and what options are available to families.

Transparency yields the information needed to ensure both top-down accountability and a viable marketplace of methods and ideas.

Conclusion

This new system will rekindle Americans' confidence in public education, and this should lead to a greater public willingness—once people understand how and why additional resources will make a difference—to invest more in education. Such new investments, in turn, could lead to even greater gains, such as abler people entering and staying in the teaching field; better preschooling; better technology and textbooks; and better performance in the classroom.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded its historic 1983 report by noting: "Children born today can expect to graduate from high school in the year 2000. We firmly believe that a movement of America's schools in the direction called for by our recommendations will prepare these children for far more effective lives in a far stronger America."

Since those words were written, nearly two generations of students have passed through U.S. schools.

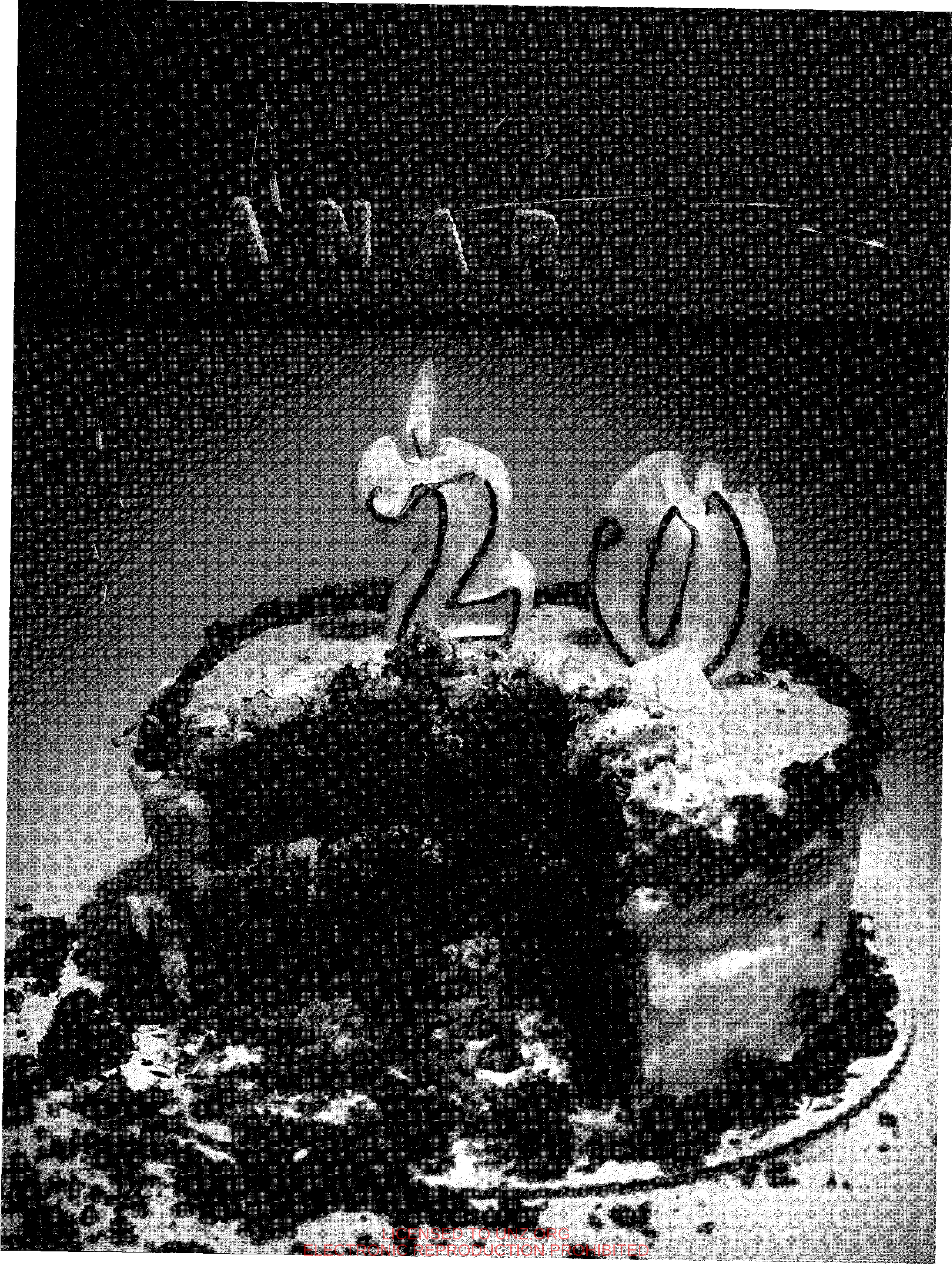
Since those words were written, real spending per pupil in U.S. public schools has risen by about 50 percent.

But since those words were written, we have gained little by way of better education results. Twenty years of entering 1st graders—about 80 million children—have walked into schools where they have scant chance of learning much more than the youngsters whose plight troubled the commission in 1983.

The shrinking globe has made it easier than anyone in 1983 could have imagined for investments and jobs to go anywhere on the planet that seems likeliest to succeed with them. Here we must look to our schools to produce the highly educated citizenry on which America's future economic vitality depends.

A nation that responded enthusiastically but irresolutely to the excellence commission's thoughtful yet modest recommendations in 1983 must now find the resolve to carry out a bottom-to-top reconstruction of its system of schooling. Can we do it? The stakes are huge, the challenge historic. We must begin today, in 2003, to make the changes that will transform American public education so that it can deliver on the democratic ideal of equal educational opportunity for students in 2013 and 2023. This is a promise that our nation has made to its children. For their sake, and for the sake of our country's future, it is a promise that we must keep.

–This is the condensed version of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education's report, "Our Schools and Our Future: Are We Still at Risk?" released as the first paper in the Hoover Institution volume of the same name and as an independent report. To read the entire report, log on to www.educationnext.org.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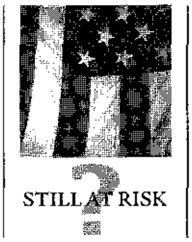


leftover BUSINESS

by MILTON GOLDBERG

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN WEBER

For someone who was "present at the creation," revisiting *A Nation at Risk* is at once satisfying and unsettling. Satisfying because this retrospective confirms that, whatever else may be said of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, its words are still taken seriously by serious people. But unsettling because both the praise and the laments offered by the members of the Koret Task Force seem strangely disconnected from (or at downright variance with) the national concerns that first gave rise to *Risk*, as well as from its intent and sometimes its actual words.

Given *Risk*'s impact, it still comes as something of a surprise to me (as it has on other occasions since 1983) to find that the main critical arrow of the task force's retrospective is misaimed. Observers continue to take exception not to what the report actually said, but to what it failed to say—complaining, for instance, that the report didn't deal enough with X, Y, or Z, or offered an "incomplete diagnosis" of the problem in American education, or that it wasn't "radical" enough in its analysis or prescriptions.

Particularly off target is the task force's allegation that *Risk* was unconcerned with the problems of elementary education. A careful reading of *Risk*'s introduction yields a simple explanation: "The Commission's charter directed it to pay particular attention to teenage youth, and we have done so largely by focusing on high schools. *Selective* attention was paid to the formative years spent in elementary schools" (emphasis added). While the commission repeatedly recognized the importance of K–8 education as the foundation for secondary school in both its analysis and its recommendations, its focus remained on secondary education. That was the mandate handed down by Terrel H. Bell, then the secretary of education, and supported via the leadership of the commission chairman, David P. Gardner. Rather than wander from issue to issue, the commission stuck to its charge.

In addition, the Koret Task Force claims that the commission "was either too obtuse or too naïve to take on the basic functioning and political control of the system itself." While the commission's obtuseness or naïveté are open to

> That the nation is still debating—and has yet to address—many of the issues raised by *A Nation at Risk* is a testament to its prescience

debate, it is true that the commission did not view the political structures of American education as the most blatant problem. The commission was alarmed more immediately by what it saw as a grave national peril stemming from the steady degeneration of (particularly) secondary education into a kind of curricular smorgasbordism.

With the flawless vision of 20 years of hindsight, it is easy enough for any of us to point out that structural flaws of power and control lay at the root of America's education problems in 1983 and now—flaws which, in the commission's defense, they were as aware of as today's second-guessers. But this was precisely where the commission made a wise choice. Rather than stoke the coals of a fruitless debate over the power politics of American education, particularly at a time when the very fate of the U.S. Department of Education was in doubt, the commission chose to address four crucial reforms—of content, expectations, time, and teaching—that could be worked on immediately, irrespective of the power context.

As to whether *Risk* was "radical enough" in its prescriptions, it again strikes me that only the perspective from 20 years later could make the commission's recommendations appear retrospectively tame. The atrophy of memory obscures the fact that they simply weren't seen that way at the time. On the contrary, the operational implications of the Excellence Commission were received in many quarters as wrenching in both their presuppositions and structural consequences:

- No less than a *whole new curriculum* was envisioned for high schools, one that would be stringent across the board, but particularly so in areas critical to the national interest—mathematics, science, foreign languages, and computer science. The designation of computer science as an instructional "basic" for American education placed it, for the first time, on a par with math, science, English, the social sciences, and the arts.

- The commission insisted on *more rigorous and measurable standards*, calling for a national (but not federal) system of student assessment. This recommendation was sufficiently radical to guarantee that states would still be wrestling with it in 2003, in the context of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

- The commission's recommendation on *time* was a call for longer school days and years. The issue of time was sufficiently beneath the radar in 1983 that it took the Department of Education another 11 years to address it in any depth. Even today, the in-school time of American students, still driven by a calendar from an agricultural age, does not begin to approach that spent by students in many other countries.

- A side-by-side reading of Risk and various reports on teaching that have appeared since reveals the *teaching* recommendations of *Risk* to be eerily prescient, if not always sufficiently radical.

- And may I also gently note that *Risk*'s passing mention of "current applications of technology" was still more than has been offered in the task force's report, which mentions technology hardly at all.

That the task force has found power structure problems to be central to its own generation's concerns about education does not diminish *Risk*'s prescience. Let history be the measure. Will there be retrospectives on the task force's report 20 years from now? And, if so, will the report be seen as equally bold, or equally "naïve"?

The Platform

The task force has recommended a challenging alternative to the shortsightedness it perceives in *Risk*'s call for reform, proffering three broad areas for action: *accountability, transparency,* and *choice*. Here, it makes some important arguments.

In its discussion of accountability, the task force rightly lines up behind the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (and, not incidentally, the *Risk* report itself) in calling for coherent academic standards in every state, in key academic subjects (regrettably omitting the arts, which *Risk* mentioned and which the National Education Goals expressly included). The task force rightly lauds the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an important tool for measuring the results of state-applied standards and recommends taking NAEP to the district level. Going beyond *Risk*, the task force calls for "an accountability system with consequences," such as rewards and sanctions whose result, it is hoped, will be that taxpayers will no longer have to continue paying for ineffective schools.

All to the good. In some cases, measures as drastic as "contracting out the management of failed schools" may well be called for. For example, my long-ago employer, the Philadelphia school district, has recently contracted out the operation of nearly 50 schools to 5 independent organizations, each espousing a different educational philosophy. With Koret, I want to insist that the key principle be: No matter the education philosophy or the means of delivery for education services, the goal has to be improved student performance. One thing American education reform definitely does not need is more pilot programs that are not held accountable for the results they generate.

One disappointing element of the task force's report vis-à-vis accountability is its weak endorsement of the No Child Left Behind Act—such as its dissatisfaction over the act's "relatively slow timelines," Washington's "scant leverage over states and districts," and the "few real consequences on educators whose schools fail." Perhaps so. But we need to guard against such critiques' becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. If we are to avoid a 20-year retrospective on the failures of the Bush administration's education efforts, it seems to me that the new law should be accorded more support than it is receiving.

The most challenging element of Koret's comprehensive reform strategy is choice. The choice issue is perhaps *the* line drawn in the sand of education reform and, therefore, deserves more than advocacy. Even if school choice were used only as a means to bolster accountability, it would reconfigure American education on the basis of an entirely new paradigm.

Because the market solution is so politically volatile, some questions need to be answered before choice can move forward. For instance, will we be sure to hold all charter schools to the same standards of accountability as other schools? As the task force suggests, choice advocates want to exempt charter schools from certain regulatory strictures. But the same acid test must be applied. Exemptions from regulations must be granted because it can be demonstrated that they stand in the way of improving student performance.

In addition, can we apply the market model to American education without dislocating children and resources? The rationale for the market model is usually based on the performance of individual schools and the application of whatever rewards and sanctions that performance evokes. But there are roughly 50 million children in the public schools of the United States who need help now. All 50 million of them are entitled to a high-quality education. It should be readily possible, as a function of the market, to provide a high-quality education for some via charter schools and vouchers now. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that, as we encourage experimentation, the benefits of the education laboratory must ultimately accrue to 50 million children. Let's expand our choices, but never lose our passion to work with and improve all of education.

In its recommendations regarding transparency, the task force is correct to insist that performance data on schools and school systems should be publicly available as a matter of course to whoever wants them, via web sites or other communication vehicles. Full disclosure on performance is the only way to ensure meaningful accountability. The task force rightly argues that it is singularly important for academic achievement to be reported in both absolute terms (compared with school and system standards) and value-added terms (student progress over stated periods). Recalling the problems the *Risk* commission had in collecting and making apples-to-apples comparisons of performance data, I am certain that the commissioners would have no problem with Koret's suggestion of a major overhaul for the National Center for Education Statistics.

Left Out

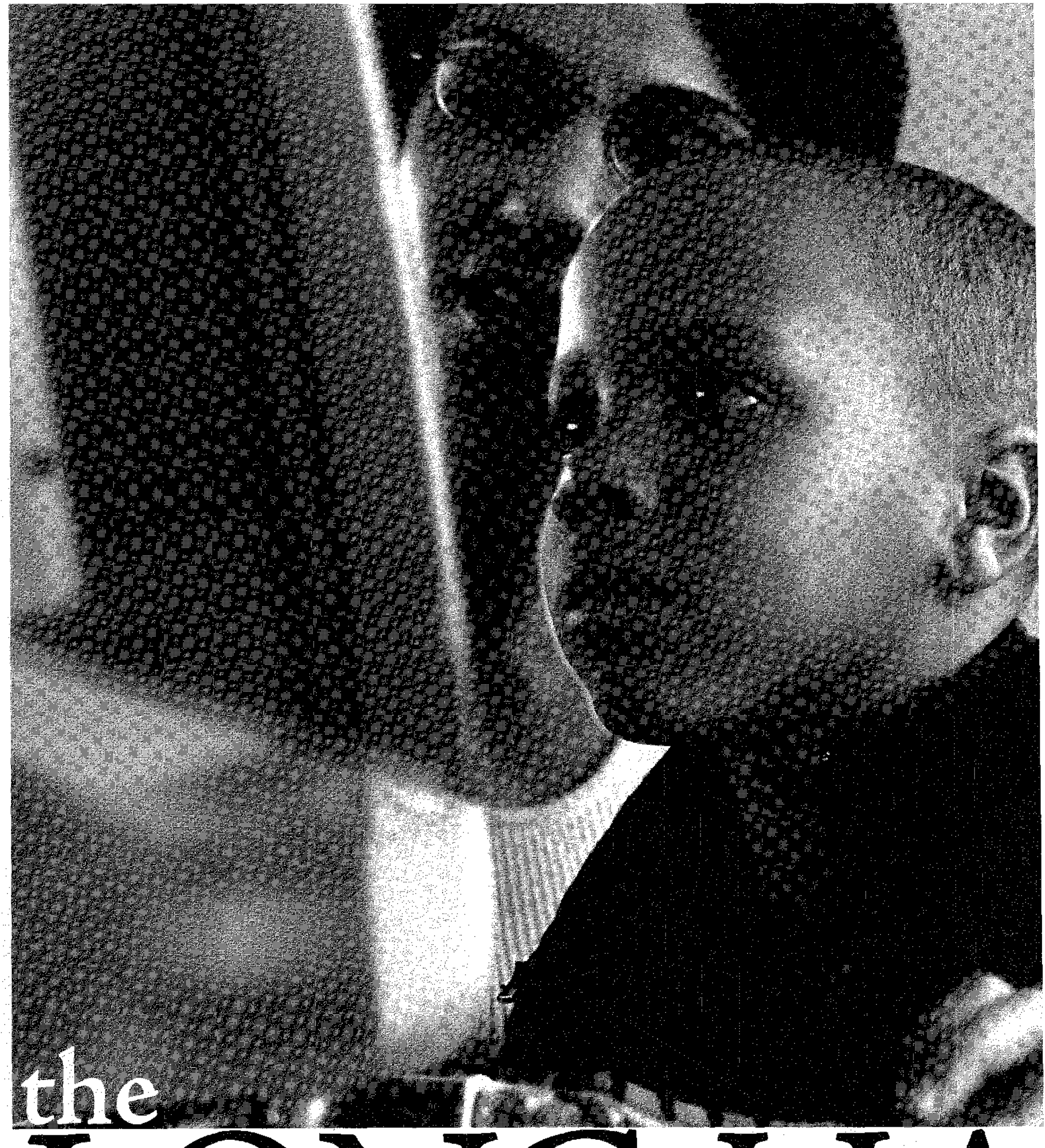
There are two gaps in the task force's report that seem worth addressing. First, in its rehearsal of the responses, outcomes, and derivatives of *Risk*, the one advance since 1983 that gets short shrift from Koret (so short that it is virtually unmentioned) is the recent reform focus not just on *teachers* as linchpins of the education system but on *teaching* as the very core of what happens in schools and thus of school reform. This focus on teachers and teaching was one of *Risk*'s four main areas of concern; it is still largely unmet as a reform agenda item. The task force's report, for all its focus on student performance, pays sparse attention to teaching.

> "The one advance since 1983 that gets short shrift from Koret is the recent focus on teaching as the very core of what happens in schools and thus of school reform."

Second, I invite the task force to take another leaf from *Risk*'s book. Toward the end of its review of the commission's work, the task force states, "Education reform will only come about in the United States when the delivery system itself is reconstructed around clear principles, sound ideas and learning-centered rules, incentives and power relationships." The road ahead must lead, the task force argues, from reform all the way to reconstruction. That assessment is on the money, but to echo the task force's own assessment of *Risk*, it doesn't go far enough. In its concluding word to parents and students, *Risk* added a further, vitally necessary dimension: "Finally," *Risk* encouraged parents to "help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues." *Risk* admonished its student readers that "you forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning. . . . When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others."

The final piece of the reform puzzle, then, is morals and character. Civic well-being and societal health depend on both the intellectual and moral status of our citizens. We who seek to improve education must always remember that this, in the end, is why we educate.

–Milton Goldberg is distinguished senior fellow at the Education Commission of the States. He served as executive director of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.



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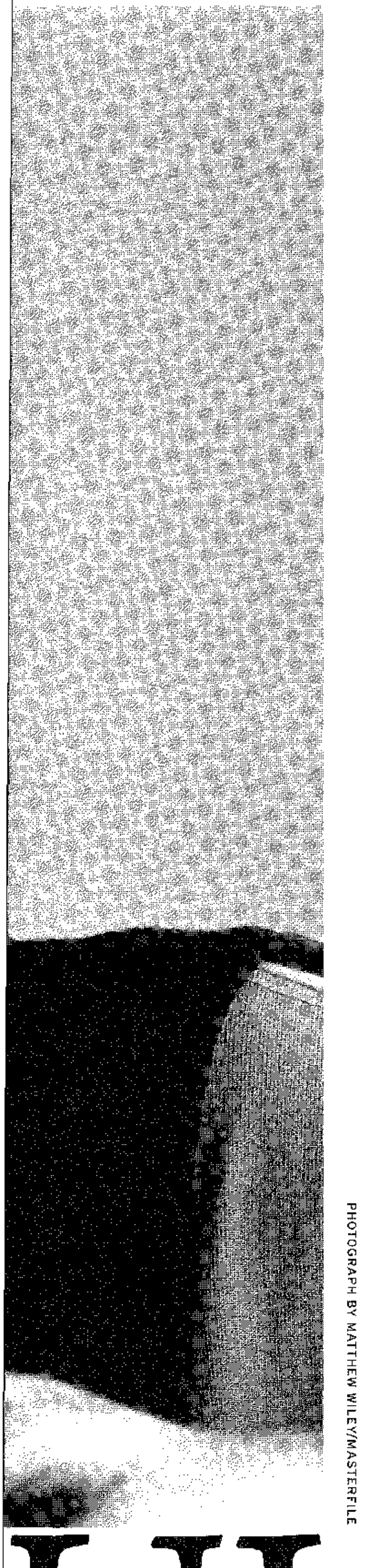


PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW WILEY/MASTERFILE

It will take prolonged effort and more than just school reforms to boost student achievement

by
PATRICIA ALBJERG GRAHAM

STILL AT RISK?

The members of the Koret Task Force are certainly correct that student achievement in America is not as high as it ought to be. The questions are why, and whether the task force's recommendations will improve the situation. To my mind, there are three fundamental explanations for the fact that the goal of universal academic achievement has not been accomplished in the 20 years since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*: 1) reforms continue to be prescribed for schooling, not for education; 2) achievement woes are most acute among children from low-income families, particularly minority families, who frequently attend the worst schools and live in communities with the fewest educational resources; 3) fundamental change in education takes a long time.

Schooling is an important but by no means comprehensive educational intervention. The culture surrounding adolescents is far more powerful than schooling—and also more difficult to "reform." Today's children live media-saturated lives. The power of culture—and its effect on student achievement—is evident in adolescents' lesser concentration on academic endeavors as they focus more on television, video games, and excessive employment during the school year. It is also apparent in their conspicuous consumption of nonessential goods.

Second, educational problems are most acute among children from low-income families, particularly minority families, whose schools are much weaker and whose homes and communities are less likely to provide resources such as museums, libraries, books, healthy recreational activities, and a culture of success based on educational achievement. Many reforms adopted in the post-*Risk* era, such as graduation exams that determine whether students can receive diplomas, tend to punish these students, since they are unlikely to receive, either at home or in school, the instruction that would allow them to score well. Their teachers and parents often did not receive such instruction, and they find themselves unable to teach children what they themselves do not know, however much they may want to do so.

In addition, the working conditions in urban schools serving low-income children are likely to be rigid, rule-bound, and unpleasant, none of which facilitates enthusiasm among teachers or fosters academic learning. Consequently, these schools suffer very high teacher turnover, forcing them to hire inexperienced and often unqualified teachers while successful, experienced teachers move on to schools with more pleasant working environments, thereby widening the gap between the educational opportunities of the rich and the poor.

The intractability of the achievement gap is just one example of the third explanation: that fundamental school reform takes a long time. Americans, including many of the authors in this issue, wish educational improvement to occur immediately. Such expectations fly in the face of reality. Twenty years, while encompassing the schooling lifetime of one entire generation, has not been long enough for significant education reforms to take hold in the past. For example, in 1882, 20 years after the Morrill Act created the land grant colleges of agriculture and engineering, evidence of instruction in those subjects was spotty indeed, and research nonexistent. In 1974, 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, many communities still had schools segregated by race.

Consider another example: the Progressive Education Association officially expired in 1955, yet 20 years later many schools were still providing the curriculum recommended by its Life Adjustment subsidiary—that 20 percent of high-school students should receive vocational training, 60 percent a "general" curriculum, including such courses as "marriage and the family," and the remaining 20 percent academic instruction. Such practices were still dominant when the National Commission on Excellence in Education reacted so fervently.

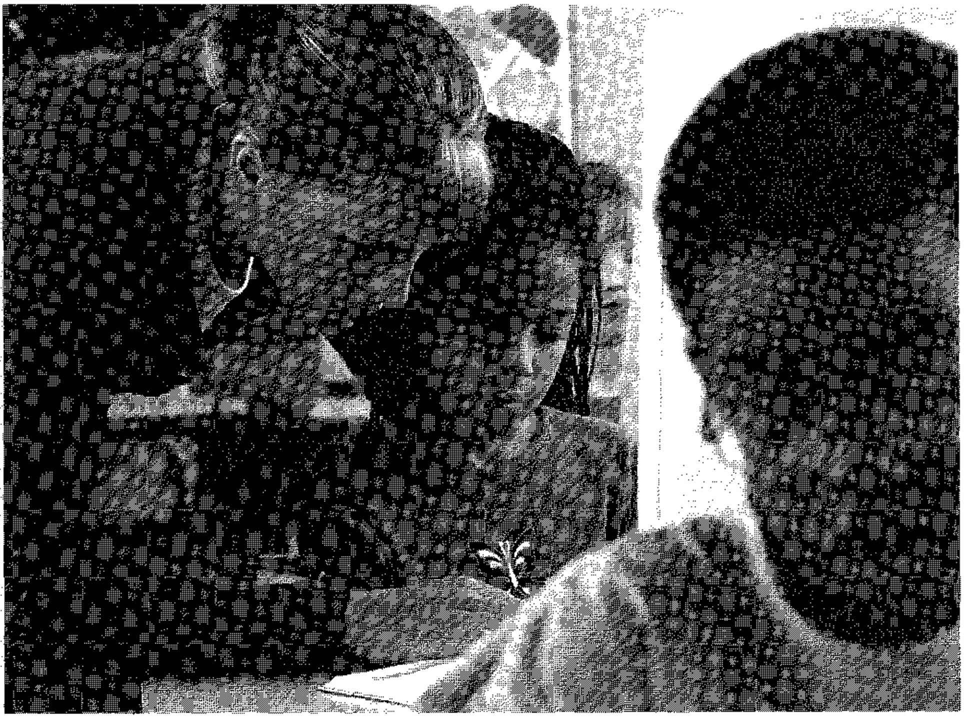
Paradigm Shifts

During the past century, educators reacted to at least four fundamental shifts in the priorities for their schools: assimilation, adjustment, access, and achievement. Throughout the period there was always an expectation that some children, both rich and poor, would excel academically, but never was there an assumption that *all* children would achieve at high levels, as we now insist. Each of these priorities had value, and over time the first three were gradually achieved.

In the early 1900s, schools were expected to "Americanize" immigrant children, so that as adults they would become loyal, productive citizens. This process involved curriculum, particularly the learning of English and of the nation's cultural traditions (George Washington's mutilation of the cherry tree was a favorite tale). But the process also extended beyond the formal curriculum to include other aspects of school life. For example, in New York City the nascent school lunch program eschewed the ethnic cuisine of the students' families, preferring the boiled/baked staples of the Anglo-American diet. Similarly, athletic programs emphasized American basketball and baseball, ignoring European soccer.

In reaction to the jingoism and authoritarianism of the traditional school, Progressive educators of the 1920s fashioned a critique of teachers and teaching: that they were too rigid, too hidebound by tradition, and not adequately supportive of students. They insisted that a teacher's primary obligation was not simply to teach a subject, but rather to help children "adjust to life." Curriculum was out, caring was in. The new ideas of teaching the "whole child" and developing children's creativity, social skills, and self-esteem were natural extensions of psychological principles that were just becoming popular. For youngsters whose home and community resources ensured that they would master the basics of reading and arithmetic regardless of school practices, progressive education provided a marvelous experience. The story was quite different for children who depended on school to introduce them to academic topics. Those children who inhabited the ever-growing "general" track in high school were denied a decent education. They were expected to "adjust" to a life that was seriously limited by their lack of preparation.

The paradigm shifted again during the 1960s and 1970s, when the civil-rights movement gave rise to a push to grant all children access to decent schooling. Federal mandates to desegregate schools, to provide extra help to disadvantaged children, and to include disabled children in regular classrooms, while all clearly necessary, placed the focus on contentious politics rather than on student learning. These were policies that many teachers and administrators either didn't know how to implement or, in many cases, didn't want to implement in their communities.



Progressive educators of the 1920s insisted that a teacher's primary obligation was not simply to teach a subject, but rather to help children "adjust to life."

The priorities of adjustment and access were dominant when many of today's senior teachers and administrators entered their professional lives. On average, today's teachers are older and hence their preparation for teaching occurred when academic achievement was not recognized as the primary purpose of schooling; their professional experience was in institutions that did not demand academic performance from them or their students. The median age for teachers in 1900 was 26. By 1976, it had risen to 33; by the mid-1990s, the median age was 44. Beginning teachers are generally much more amenable to accommodating new school-imposed priorities than are experienced ones. Thus, reordering school priorities to focus on achievement—as *Risk* tried to do—was much more difficult with teachers and administrators who assumed their professional identities in an era when other priorities for schooling were in effect.

The Next Wave of Reforms

If the Koret Task Force's recommendations are to work, it is important to recognize that the principles of accountability, choice, and transparency are all policy positions. In education the issue is not simply to change the policy, but also to change the practice—a tricky translation, particularly when the policy requires fundamental change in the behavior of both adults and children. A state sets an "accountability goal," such as requiring students to pass an examination, and uses that score as a marker for academic achievement. Yet at present it is impossible to ensure that the child has actually been taught the material tested by the exam or that the exam in fact captures the breadth of knowledge that the student should have. Changing policy is much easier than changing practice. It is easy to mandate tests, but much more difficult to ensure that all children learn and are capable of using that knowledge in a productive manner.

> “In education the issue is not simply to change the policy, but also to change the practice—a tricky translation.”

Like the conclusions of *Risk*, the task force's recommendations pay scant attention to the educational influences that affect children outside of school. Schooling is certainly an easier object of policy focus than youth culture, but unless the values of schooling and of youth culture are congruent, then schooling is likely to lose. Among many affluent families who want their offspring to attend elite colleges, the school/home/culture values are quite well aligned, and as a group these youngsters have high levels of academic achievement. What remains to be seen is whether widespread public support for universal academic achievement can be maintained when the youth culture is against it, when significant fractions of young people are dropping out of high school, and when others are failing high-school exit examinations.

The recommendation that "decisions by parents rather than bureaucratic regulation should drive the education enterprise" limits education decisions in America to those who have children of school age. As a nation, we all have a stake in how our young citizens learn. Certainly parents have a special role, as acknowledged by the Supreme Court in the 1925 *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* case, where parents seeking religious education for their children in Roman Catholic schools sought to have that schooling recognized as meeting the compulsory education requirements. But it is after all the government that requires parents to make sure their children all get an education, whether the parents want it or not. Thus the higher authority is the nation, committed to preserving itself through the effective education of its young, that has a fundamental role in providing and supporting education. When that education is inadequate, as many today would assert is the case for our children, particularly those born to disadvantaged families, the issue is how we help those children learn.

The task force is right to emphasize the need for transparency in the education system. Society as a whole and parents in particular need to be able to understand how our children's education is progressing. This information needs to be presented in a manner that is both accurate and understandable. Too often schools have failed this test miserably, sending home report cards that are meaningless and producing school transcripts that are incomprehensible. The reports nearly always present a rosier picture of the student's progress (and by implication of the teacher's effectiveness) than other measures might reveal. Parents are still relatively more satisfied with their children's school than with the nation's schools, but gradually social concern has been building about the quality of education for all.

One of the consequences of the extraordinary decline (nearly 90 percent) in federal support for education research over the past 25 years, as reported by Richard C. Atkinson and Gregg B. Jackson in their 1992 report for the National Academy of Sciences, has been the profound loss of rigorous inquiry into how schooling can be improved academically for all and how youth culture can become more attuned to the deferred gratification of academic achievement and less oriented to the immediate imperatives of money, clothes, and other amusements. Funding for policy work, such as this document, has been more readily available from private sources than has money for systematic research, both quantitative and qualitative, about education, its theory and its practice. Only with more knowledge, carefully developed, will we be able to effect the transformation of American schooling that would make academic achievement universal.

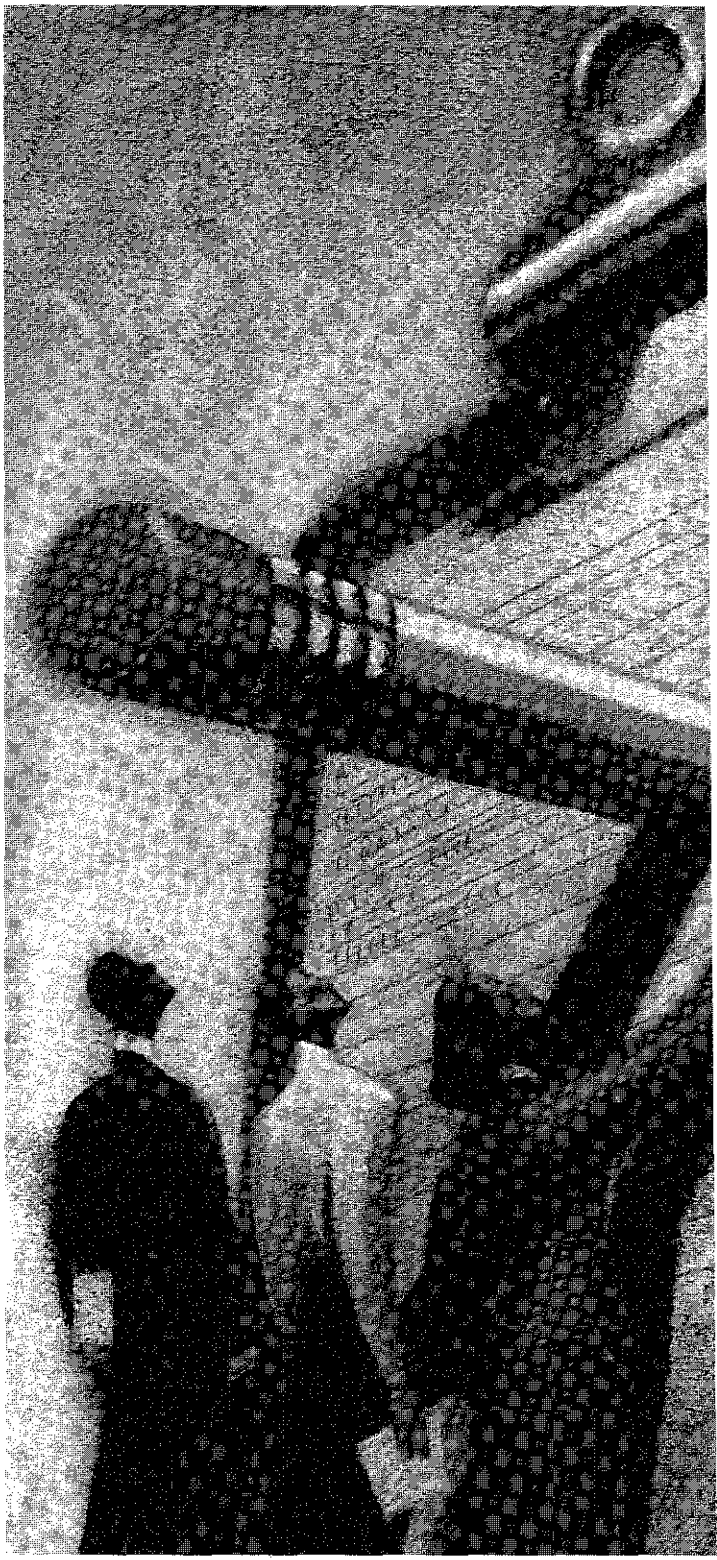
A well-educated populace will not guarantee either a strong economy or global security or even a democracy (as Nazi Germany demonstrated in the preceding century), but all three are highly unlikely without one. As Thomas Jefferson presciently observed in 1816, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." The authors of *Risk* and of the Koret Task Force report correctly concluded that greater academic achievement among all living in this country is essential. The value is not in doubt. However, the means of achieving this goal immediately are illusory.

–Patricia Albjerg Graham is a research professor of the history of education and former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

STILL AT RISK

UNrecognized

by JAMES B. HUNT JR.

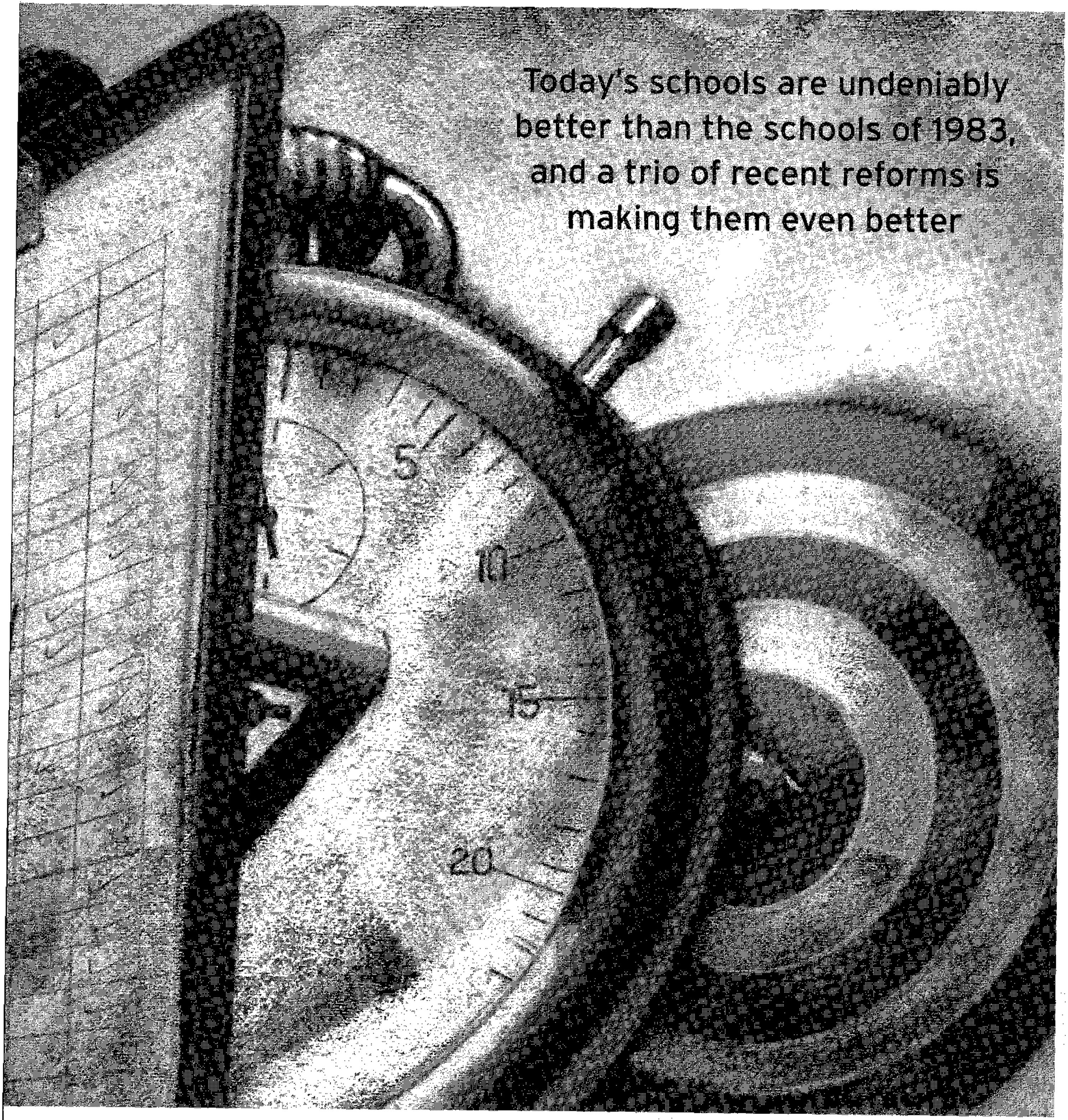


THE KORET TASK FORCE DOES A VALUABLE SERVICE for American education. Its recommendations are largely on target as we stick with the task of improving our schools and move toward the goal of "leaving no child behind." But I see the events of the past 20 years in a different light. Our educators, students, parents, and policymakers deserve much more credit for what has been accomplished. While improvement has come in fits and starts—and detoured into a number of dead-ends—American education is better today than it was in 1983. And we are on the verge of making it much better.

I was governor of North Carolina in 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*. Against heavy opposition, I had pushed hard to begin statewide testing of our public school students. Our early assessments had revealed major deficiencies. *Risk* showed that this was a nationwide phenomenon. Many policymakers sensed that the report would provide a major boost to our efforts to bring about serious change in education.

As chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) at that time, I pushed other governors and corporate CEOs to address the problem with a high-level "Task Force on Education for Economic Growth," thus establishing the vital link between education and economic growth that has fueled so many of the ensuing efforts to improve schools at the state level. Its calls for higher standards in schools and mastery of the basic competencies required for a globally competitive work force were warmly received by the National Governors Association (NGA). Candidates who might once have touted themselves as the "Jobs Governor" suddenly found that the way to attract employers to their states was to become an "Education Governor."

The release of *Risk* acted like a meteor hitting the ocean, creating tidal waves of reform everywhere. Another report of the mid-1980s, the Carnegie Corporation's *A Nation Prepared* (see Chester E. Finn Jr., "High Hurdles," p. 62), sparked a long



Today's schools are undeniably better than the schools of 1983, and a trio of recent reforms is making them even better

PROGRESS

focus on excellence in teaching in an effort to define what Tom Kean, former governor of New Jersey, termed "what accomplished teachers need to know and be able to do." Nearly every leader of the NGA, Republicans and Democrats alike, made education, standards, and economic competitiveness a theme of his chairmanship. Then, in 1989, the governors and President George H.W. Bush held the nation's first education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and formulated national education goals for America.

Three major developments of the past 20 years are now bearing fruit: 1) the creation of standards and accountability; 2) research on how the brain develops in early childhood and its implications for pre-K education and child care; and 3) an emerging focus on the single biggest factor in student achievement—teacher quality.

> "It is high time that we commit the full resources required to improve every school in America, so that every child is at grade level or above."

Standards and Accountability

While the Koret report finds that "standards-based reforms . . . though promising . . . are hard to get right," the truth is that most states have been working hard to "get it right" and have met with good success. Groups like Achieve, the Business Roundtable, ECS, and the recent summits led by IBM CEO Louis Gerstner have had a real impact. Most of the nation's governors have gotten the message: if you aren't pushing hard to set high standards and making considerable progress toward achieving them, your state will not be "the place" for business to locate and jobs to be created.

Only a handful of states now lack standards. Most need better standards than they have, but they have made a good start. In 1983 only a handful of states had *any* standards, and we were measuring progress in education almost solely by the increase in spending rather than achievement.

It is easy to criticize the work of states and school districts on standards, but dedicated teachers, principals, superintendents, and curriculum experts have spent untold hours trying to build their systems. They deserve our commendation. Some were especially bold. Virginia and Massachusetts can attest to the agony involved in setting high standards and, as a result, having many students fail the exams. But they can also attest to the value of sticking with this venture—providing greater support to students and teachers and thus seeing test scores climb dramatically. Others are emulating them.

Any fair assessment of the events of the two decades since *Risk* must conclude that we are well on our way to high and rigorous standards and accountability. We should be proud of that progress and committed to do a lot better.

Ready to Learn

The Koret report hardly mentions one of the most important developments since *Risk*: science's remarkable progress in understanding how a child's brain develops in the earliest years and the ensuing efforts to provide the early child care and education necessary for school readiness.

We now know that all children are born with about the same number of brain cells, billions of them. But the capacity for intelligence is largely set early in the child's life, when those brain cells are connected up. These connections are formed largely from stimulation—hearing sounds, seeing colors, feeling things, responding to love and care.

We also know a great deal now about *what* is happening *when* in a child's development. This enables educators to help young, inexperienced parents know what to look for and how to be most helpful to their child's development.

This knowledge is part of the research base that has propelled quality child care and education to the forefront as a strategy for educational success. Roughly half of the "achievement gap" is already present when poor, minority children enter the schoolhouse door. The inescapable conclusion is that we must help these children get a better start early in life.

Teacher Quality

The Koret report misses the mark most seriously with regard to teaching. It states, "Higher quality teachers are key to improving our schools, but the proper gauge to measure that quality has nothing to do with paper credentials." It goes on to say that the only true gauge of teacher quality is "classroom effectiveness." Of course that is the best measure. But how do we *get* teachers who are effective in boosting student achievement? How do we improve their knowledge and skills? How do we keep them in the classroom? Fortunately, lots of people have been working on answers to those questions.

In 1996 the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future challenged the nation to provide every child with what should be his or her educational birthright: "access to competent, caring, qualified teaching in schools organized for success." It urged the nation to get serious about teacher standards, reinvent teacher preparation and professional development, put qualified teachers in every classroom, encourage and reward teacher knowledge and skill, and create schools organized for student and teacher success. Twenty states joined together as partners to implement the recommendations, while others have taken some action.

Major business groups have taken up the quest for better teaching and are pushing for higher standards for teachers, better preparation and professional development, and higher pay linked to performance. They also urged the creation of a corps of "master" teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Today there are nearly 24,000 national board-certified teachers found in all 50 states. They meet rigorous standards. They receive extra compensation in many states and districts—$6,000 per year more in Mississippi and $7,500 more in South Carolina. They are superb teachers for their students and mentors and role models to fellow teachers.

In North Carolina, where I had the honor to serve as governor for 16 of the past 26 years, we have made a consistent effort to improve our schools and student performance. Our leaders have worked at this in a bipartisan manner, joined by the legislature, state board of education, department of public instruction, universities and colleges, and educators throughout the K–12 system. The business community has been especially supportive of new policies and greater resources. These efforts have yielded some impressive progress, noted by observers from *Education Week* to the RAND Corporation. Our standards, assessments, and accountability arrangements have been widely applauded. North Carolina now has the most "board-certified" teachers in the country—5,111, one of every 17 teachers in the state.

Most important, student performance has improved dramatically. The percentage of students scoring at or above grade level on the state's proficiency tests has risen from 56 percent to nearly 75 percent in just six years. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress confirm these gains: during the 1990s, North Carolina experienced the highest gains of any state on the 4th- and 8th-grade math exams.

I attribute much of this success to our high-quality early-childhood initiative, Smart Start, and to our rewards for improving student learning. In North Carolina each teacher earns a $600 bonus for the year if the school's students, on average, make a full year's growth in learning. If the school exceeds a year's gain by 10 percent or more, the teachers get an additional $600 bonus. If all the subgroups delineated by the No Child Left Behind Act make a year's progress, the teachers each get another $600. That's a total of $1,800 of compensation per year tied directly to student performance.

The Koret Agenda

The three principles—accountability, choice, and transparency—that the Koret report puts at the core of efforts to change incentive structures and power relationships in schooling are valid.

I believe that choice should be exercised within the public school system. Let the public schools compete for students; public universities in my state certainly compete against one another successfully.

Transparency is worth special attention. As the task force says, the current system is "opaque" nearly everywhere we look. We need to examine systems, at both the state and the district level, to see how schools, students, and teachers are performing. But we especially need to report to parents and students about their *own* schools. They should receive annual report cards showing the qualifications of teachers and records of student and teacher performance. My experience is that parents and the school respond positively if these things are done with care and honesty.

New means of accountability, such as the Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Service and Just for the Kids, provide powerful ways of analyzing school performance (including financial data) and can be easily accessed by parents via the Internet. The popularity of these services illustrates how much demand there is for information on school quality.

It is true, as the task force insists, that we cannot improve the schools of America by just "throwing more money at them." We must reform them in a thorough way. But we also can't bring about dramatic improvements without a significant investment of new resources.

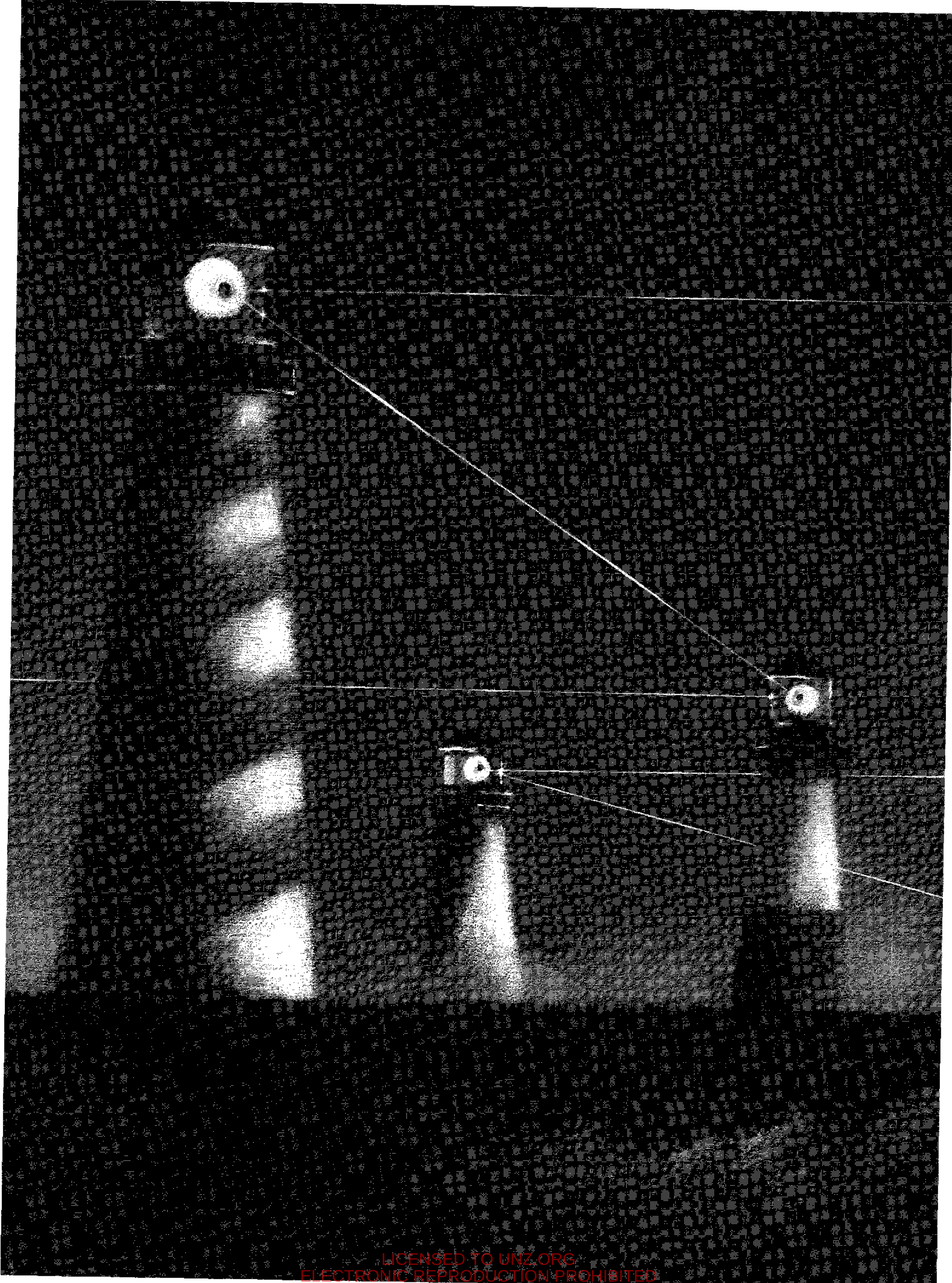
One example makes the case. Low-performing schools need better principals and teachers. They may also need better facilities and services for students. Let's measure how the teachers and principals perform and pay them more if they get good results. But let's recognize that this will take more money, not less. We will have to compete in the marketplace to get these people, and we will have to pay for them.

In fact, I believe it is high time that we commit the full resources required to reform and improve every school in America so that every child is learning, so that every child is at grade level or above.

Many of these funds will have to come from the federal government. Right after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965, the share of my state's "education bill" paid by Washington was about 14 percent. Now it is down to about 7 percent. As we all rally to "leave no child behind," why don't we commit to get that proportion of federal support back up to 14 percent, where it used to be?

When we as a nation are threatened by Osama Bin Laden or Saddam Hussein, money is no object. We are paying dearly to fight them and to bolster homeland security. I fully support doing both. But, as *Risk* said, the threat to our country from mediocre education is very much like that of war. We should fight the battle for excellent schools with equal fervor.

–James B. Hunt Jr. is chairman of the board at the James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of North Carolina and the former governor of North Carolina.



HELP WANTED

Choice, accountability, and transparency will mean little without a new generation of school-based leaders to light the way

by
LISA GRAHAM KEEGAN

STILL AT RISK

A Nation at Risk stunned the establishment and captivated the public when it was released 20 years ago. This was something that hadn't been seen before in American education—a startling indictment of a system that most regarded as sacrosanct. Condemning it was considered nearly blasphemous.

Nevertheless, *Risk* said, all was not lost. Its authors made a number of policy recommendations that they believed would improve American education before another generation fell victim to its empty promises. Now that everyone knew what the problem was, someone would surely get around to fixing it.

No one did.

To be sure, some progress has been made over the past two decades. For example, we have determined definitively—meaning with scientific research, not simply because someone said it in print—that there are some basic ingredients that are necessary for a good education. We know, for example, that teacher quality counts more than almost any other external factor, including class size or neighborhood attributes, in determining academic success. We know that phonics instruction produces the kind of real results that gimmicky "whole language" approaches can't replicate. We know that competition—through vouchers, charter schools, and even simply a diverse array of school districts and private schools in a geographic area—creates an environment in which successful schools thrive.

Yet we risk another damning and depressing report 20 years from now if we simply assume that our advanced knowledge of what works can make it real for all of the nation's children. Vast repositories of best practices and sage advice do no more to educate a child than a blueprint does to get a house built. Ideas need to be put into action, not just onto paper. Doing so is easier said than done, and, unfortunately, we don't always make it easy on ourselves.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GIBBS

School Leadership

First of all, the nation suffers from a distinct confusion over who is in charge of what. We may know that learning depends on teachers' solid understanding of their subjects, their clear appreciation of and enthusiasm for those subjects, and their willingness to tailor their instruction to the needs of each student. But that means little unless we also understand that the only people capable of ensuring quality instruction in a school are that school's leaders. Governors, legislators, and even local school boards may all say they know "what works" in instruction, but they simply cannot create that quality with the stroke of a legislative pen, such as when they mandate phonics instruction.

They are also often unaware that the rules, policies, and laws that they have written or simply enforced may be direct impediments to creating an ideal classroom setting. Funding students based on where they reside, rather than where they attend school, for example, is a practice as old as the system itself, and just as outdated. That same finance system also mandates that districts receive their appropriation based on their enrollment at a single date during the year, funding schools for an entire year for a child who may have left his school the next day. Archaic funding policies like these do little to encourage innovation within the system.

Proactive teachers, principals, and administrators are both the gatekeepers and the keymasters of education reform. Any changes in the system must be carried out by educators working at the school level. Without great school and classroom leaders to make sure reforms are implemented, even the most ambitious and sweeping policy changes can sputter out by the time they hit your children's classrooms.

In the world of schooling, the majority of highly successful turnaround cases seem to be those where an individual educator had not only the right idea about instruction, but also the tenacity to bend or break those rules that would have prevented meaningful changes at the school level. But it should no longer be the case that only the lucky students get to learn in schools where teachers have decided to work against standard expectations.

It is critical, then, that education reformers begin recruiting, grooming, and mentoring potential leaders not just for key policymaking positions in the hierarchy of education, but for positions in which they would lead, innovate, teach, and inspire. Those who matter most in the reform movement are those in the school. It's time to start putting leaders in place in the classroom and at the school level first.

It won't be easy. As the Koret Task Force's report continually observes, the resistance to change within the system is not only intense, but also, in the majority of cases, overwhelming. Any effort to improve or change education is usually met with a backlash from unions and other organizations that sense that changes in the way the system works can often cut into their power base.

In 2000, for example, Arizona voters approved Proposition 301, an initiative meant to inject funding directly into classrooms, implement performance pay for teachers, encourage school-based management, and complete a statewide system for collecting and reporting data. Voters understood that passage of this proposition would mean more money in their classrooms, better pay for the teachers in their schools, more control at the local level, and more information for parents.

That didn't sit well with the unions, however. After the proposition passed, state union representatives immediately lobbied the state attorney general to issue a "clarification" explaining that performance pay actually meant an across-the-board bonus for every teacher in a school or district, regardless of performance, and that funding classrooms directly actually meant passing the funding through the district first so the district, rather than the school, can make the major funding decisions. That was the end of direct classroom funding, and school-based management went with it—and that was essentially the end of the reforms of Proposition 301. Where the voters had seen an opportunity, the unions saw a threat. It's likely to continue that way for quite some time.

It is reasonable to assume that the next generation of potential leaders will come from pipelines other than colleges of education—a virtual breeding ground for educational stagnation—such as alternative certification programs for teachers. The Koret report rightly endorses choice, but choice must apply to the adults, as well as the children, in the education system. Alternative certification programs like the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence—which provides teachers with a certification based on their mastery of subject area and excellence in classroom management—need to be endorsed by states as a viable route to ensuring excellence in the classroom. Teachers need to be recognized for their ability to teach, not for their ability to toe the party line in a teaching college. Only in this way can we hope to truly professionalize the teaching profession and pave the way for needed changes in tenure, performance-based pay, and other policies that contribute to the transparency in the system that Koret envisions.

Unintended Consequences

Shaming the education establishment into doing the right thing—as *Risk* attempted to do—only motivated educators to defend their turf and the status quo more creatively. As a result, reformers have let the establishment define the terms of the debate. Advocates for school choice suddenly become "anti-public school." Those who want to professionalize teaching are labeled as unsympathetic to the "plight" of teachers. Those who push high academic standards for all students are scolded for supposedly forcing poor children to drop out of school.

Reform is presently being resisted in an act of self-preservation, which the unions have cleverly labeled "looking out for the best interests of children." Don't believe it. Only the interests of structures and systems are being safeguarded, not those of children. And reformers need to stop apologizing for advocating reforms that are good for children, but might cause some adults somewhere a bit of discomfort. Again, leadership matters.

Another unintended effect of *Risk* was the proliferation of federal education programs shortly after its publication, as policymakers struggled mightily to respond to the report and its recommendations. Gimmicks and fads—such as efforts to reduce class size or to create parent education programs—suddenly became federal policies as legislators scrambled to find the Next Big Thing to improve education. When the nation's governors lent their voices to the demand for change in education in the late 1980s, President Bush put together the America 2000 proposal, which eventually became President Clinton's Goals 2000 program, which was mothballed when it became apparent that it, too, wasn't doing much to increase education achievement. Meanwhile, federal funding on programs mushroomed, without any noticeable gains in student achievement.

> **"Because the education system could not be shamed into moving 20 years ago, the federal government has finally tried to move the system itself."**

As a result of the legislative activity of the past 20 years, school systems have grown in size and power, under the mistaken assumption that more funding and more authority would give educators the clout and resources they needed to improve achievement. It didn't happen—and in the meantime, as the system grew, very little was done at the federal level to empower families or any others served by the system.

All that is starting to change, and change for the better. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 swept away much of the legislative clutter that had littered the education landscape for more than a decade, in favor of programs based in good science and research. High academic standards and quality teaching—two of the cornerstone recommendations of the *Risk* report—were finally embraced formally and built into the law. A number of state-based initiatives that favored parents and parental choice were reflected, albeit sometimes only partially, in the final legislation, including new requirements for school choice and supplemental services for children trapped in chronically failing schools.

While No Child Left Behind represents the most comprehensive and substantive change to education policy in more than 30 years, there has been some concern that the act overreaches, both in scope and in structure. Some have argued that not only are its objectives too lofty and ambitious, but in its haste to effect change immediately, the bill also arbitrarily makes some decisions that should be left to state and local decisionmakers.

For example, provisions in the law that require supplemental services, such as tutoring, and school choice for schools that have failed to improve have led some critics to bemoan these actions as a federal power grab. "This law moves against the tradition of local control in a fundamental way," said one midwestern school board member in the autumn of 2001. "We all seek nationally defined excellence, but we must be free to adapt to local conditions." What needs to be pointed out is that these same local decisionmakers have always had the authority to put such programs in place, but have simply refused to do so out of a need to protect their power base. Choosing not to act must no longer be considered "adapting to local conditions."

The requirements of No Child Left Behind—which include, for the first time, real consequences for schools that do not show academic progress for all students—are beginning to break the stranglehold that entrenched interests have had on our schools for far too long. If local autonomy has been somewhat impeded by the new law—a debatable conclusion—then it could also be argued that this is a self-inflicted wound. Because the system could not be shamed into moving 20 years ago, the federal government has finally tried to move the system itself.

It is clear that *Risk* underestimated the influence of the education establishment in framing education policy and overestimated its interest in doing the right thing for children. While teacher unions and other organizations representing administrators, policymakers, and school chiefs all claim to be acting on behalf of children, they are all by their very nature really only looking out for their own best interests—that's what they're there for. Self-preservation is a strong motivator, and breaking the stronghold on the system of these interests—what Teddy Roosevelt would have called "trust busting"—will likely continue to be a major challenge for educators and policymakers.

Such trust busting will require a new generation of educators who not only know what works in education, but also know how to do it. Ensuring that these innovators have the authority to make the necessary changes to the system will take time. Until then, we need to hold those who presently have the authority to create successful schools accountable for doing so. The price for inaction is another 20 years of unrealized promises and another generation of unrealized student potential.

–Lisa Graham Keegan is chief executive officer of the Education Leaders Council and the former superintendent of public instruction in Arizona.

A Nation at Risk was an historic document—for its time. Now we know that while its findings were dead on, its reform agenda relied too much on the existing system

by DIANE RAVITCH

THE TEST OF TIME

WITH THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO DECADES, it is now apparent that *A Nation at Risk* was the most important education reform document of the 20th century. It captured the attention not only of educators and political and business leaders, but also of the general public, thus shaping the terms of the debate about schooling for a generation after its publication.

Though unique for its relative fame and influence, *Risk* actually followed a long tradition of "reform by commission" among American educators. Over the past century, whenever it seemed important to rouse the public or fellow members of their profession to a particular course of action, educators formed a commission, staffed it with high-powered members, and produced some sort of consensus platform. The first such commission—famously known as the Committee of Ten—released its recommendations in 1893. Over the next two decades, there would also be a Committee of Five, a Committee of Seven, and a Committee of Fifteen, but none was as renowned as the Ten. The Ten addressed the question of whether there should be one set of curricula for college-bound students, another for the great majority who did not intend to go to college. At the time, only a tiny proportion of youth ever attended high school or prepared for college. Nonetheless, the Ten called for strong academic preparation for all, on the grounds that this was the best preparation for life regardless of one's future occupation.

STILL AT RISK

Subsequent commissions were often formed in direct opposition to the Ten's recommendations. For instance, the most significant report of the early 1900s, known as the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (released in 1918), declared that academic studies should share equal status with instruction in health, vocation, "worthy home-membership," citizenship, character, and "worthy use of leisure."

Over the decades, however, such reports gained less and less attention as more and more of them poured forth, keyed to the latest crisis in school or society. The fact that so many of them were written by education professionals for other education professionals often made them incomprehensible to the larger public.

In *Risk*, by contrast, the public found a report that was written in plain English. Here was a message that noneducators understood. The public's powerful response signaled that *Risk* had spoken to deeply held concerns; its calls for higher expectations and higher standards had clearly struck a chord. It reached far beyond the professionals and energized reforms that 20 years later have still not run their course.

ILLUSTRATION BY CRAIG FRAZIER

Making a Splash

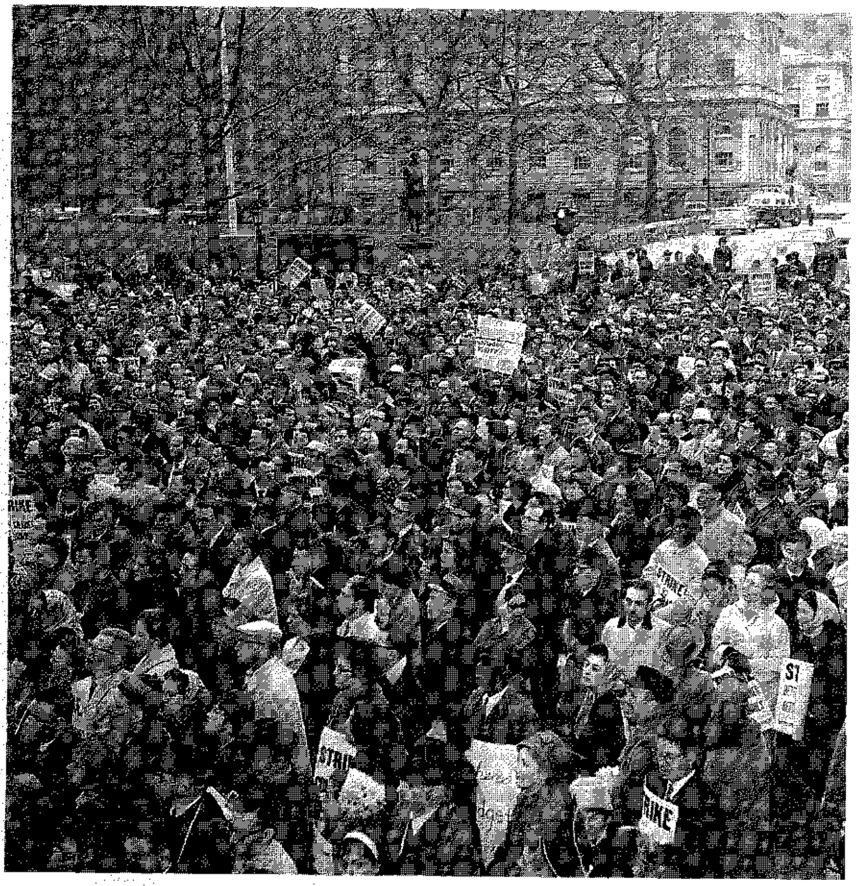
The roots of *Risk* began in an effort to salvage the U.S. Department of Education. During his first presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan had promised to abolish the department, which had been created in the closing months of the Carter administration. Reagan believed that the department would inevitably expand the reach of the federal government into issues that he thought should be left to state and local officials. However, Reagan's secretary of education, Terrel Bell, didn't agree with Reagan's plan (nor did Reagan have the votes in Congress to get rid of the department). In his effort to demonstrate the power of the bully pulpit, Secretary Bell asked Reagan to appoint an independent commission to study the condition of American education. When the president declined to do so, Secretary Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education as a cabinet-level operation. The favorable attention accorded the commission's report, which was released in April 1983, ended the debate about abolishing the department, guaranteeing its political survival.

The commission included several eminent educators: its chairman, David P. Gardner, president of the University of Utah and soon-to-be president of the University of California; Nobel laureate Glenn T. Seaborg of the University of California; Gerald Holton of Harvard University; and A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University. In its most memorable phrase, the commission warned of the American education system's "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." The commission maintained, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."

The commission argued that the nation's future prosperity was being imperiled by recent declines in student achievement. In the industrial era, it held, an educated elite was sufficient, but in the emerging "information age," knowledge, learning, and "skilled intelligence" were necessary for all. The commission supported its claims with data on achievement drawn from national and international sources, including the SAT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the College Board achievement tests, and international exams. If achievement continued to decline, it implied, other nations would overtake the American economy and leave us behind.

At the time, a few critics from the academic world derided the report's gloomy diagnosis and war-soaked imagery. They questioned the commission's use of data and its assertions about grade inflation and low standards (although they did not object to its recommendations for more spending). A decade later, they regarded the booming American economy and Japan's long recession as proof that *Risk* had been wrong. How, after all, could the economy be so successful if it relied on workers who, as *Risk* had alleged, were poorly educated? Either no relationship existed between the quality of a nation's education system and its economic success, or America's K–12 schools were in fact good enough to produce a robust economy.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the report's attempt to draw a straight line between the quality of the schools and the health of the economy was on shaky ground. It would be ridiculous to claim that a nation's economic well-being is unaffected by the quality of education available to its citizens. But the connections are not as clear-cut as *Risk* asserted, and there are many other factors, such as the immigration of educated workers, opportunities for remediation, out-of-school learning opportunities, and the abundance of postsecondary institutions that can compensate for the failings of the formal K–12 system.



The early 1980s presented, in addition to the economic crisis, a heap of public discontent about schooling that had been accumulating since the 1960s.

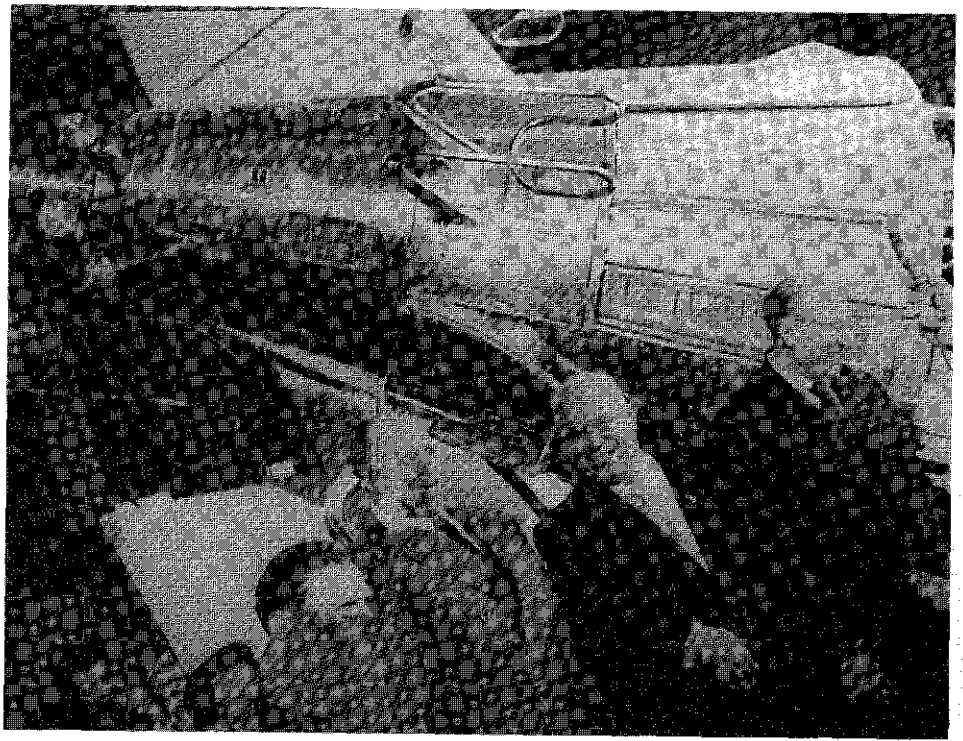
PHOTOGRAPH FROM AP/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS

Historical Context

Risk was uniquely a document of the early 1980s. The American economy was in recession, while the economies of Japan and several other Asian nations were booming. Since the early 20th century, educators had developed a long tradition of hitching education to whatever issue was the foremost national concern when in search of new funds or programs. The formula went like this: Whatever the crisis, new education programs would solve it. In the early decades of the century, reformers insisted that the schools needed more vocational and industrial programs to meet the needs of American industry. The rhetoric of education-as-panacea was continued during the Depression, World War II, the atomic age, and in the wake of the Soviets' launch of Sputnik. With new funds and pedagogical changes, educators promised, the schools would solve the crisis of the day.

The early 1980s presented, in addition to the economic crisis, a heap of public discontent about schooling that had been accumulating since the 1960s. At the time, numerous journalistic accounts were telling of schools' abandoning many academic requirements, replacing them with frivolous, fluffy electives, like cooking for singles. Parents worried whether students were learning basic skills, especially when they saw in the newspaper allegations that high-school graduates couldn't read their own diplomas. Many state legislatures responded by mandating "minimum competency" tests to ensure that students were able to read, write, and figure.

The revolution in the schools that led to the abandonment of many academic requirements began during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, as radical critics hammered away at the public school system for whatever faults they discerned in American society. Jonathan Kozol's award-winning *Death at an Early Age* portrayed the Boston public schools as havens for sadistic, racist teachers; other critics claimed that teachers were rigid, insensitive, hostile to children, and ignorant about pedagogical innovation, among other things. The radical critics held that planned curricula, testing, textbooks, homework, and the other practices associated with traditional schooling were instruments of oppression. Their goal was child liberation, the creation of permissive environments in which there was no authority, in which children learned because they wanted to and studied what interested them most. In one of the more temperate tracts of that era, Charles Silberman insisted that the public schools were not really malign, just mindless.



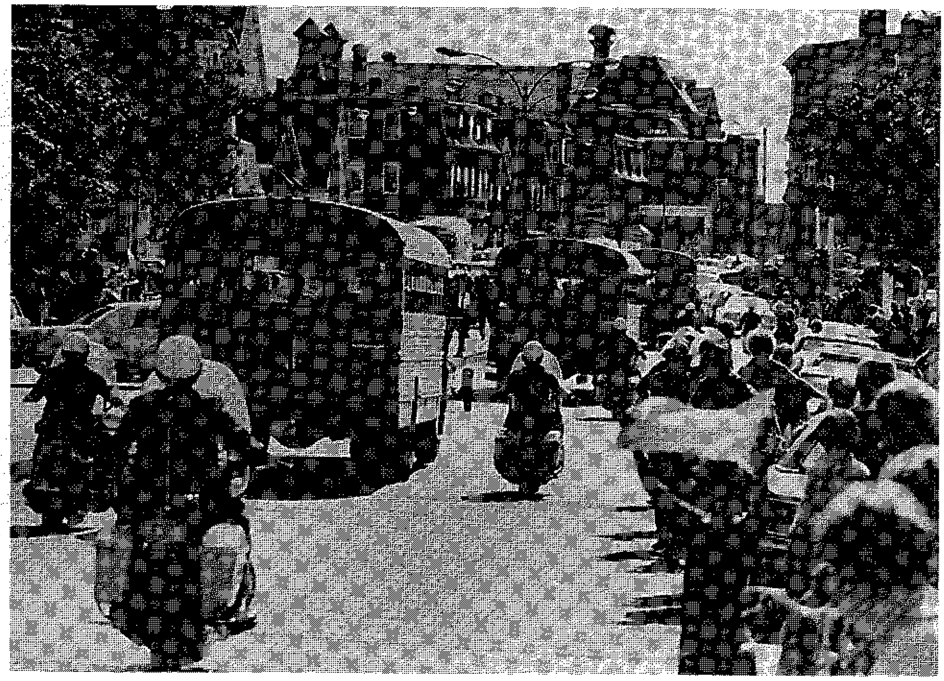
The rhetoric of education-as-panacea was continued during the Depression, World War II, the atomic age, and in the wake of the Soviets' launch of Sputnik. With new funds and pedagogical changes, educators promised, the schools would solve the crisis of the day.

PHOTOGRAPH FROM HULTON ARCHIVES

Under attack from the left, educators sought to reinvent traditional schooling, trying innovations such as open education, schools "without walls," curricula relevant to student interests, and student-designed curricula. Schools of education embraced these innovations and identified themselves with the radical attacks on traditional teacher-led schooling and public education. The ferment excited those pedagogical leaders who agreed with its direction, but it was disheartening for those teachers and parents who wanted schools and classrooms where the adults were in charge. It also played havoc with curriculum, standards, grades, and other traditional elements of schooling.

By the mid-1970s, after nearly a decade of fevered change, troubling reports had begun to emerge. In 1975 the *New York Times* reported that scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test had been falling since the mid-1960s. The shock value of this information cannot be overestimated. Not only were average scores falling on both the verbal and mathematical tests, but the percentage of students scoring at high levels (over 600 and over 700) had also fallen sharply.

In response to this disheartening news, the College Board, which was responsible for the SAT, created a blue-ribbon commission to examine the causes of the decline in scores. The commission's 1977 report, *On Further Examination*, was virtually a rehearsal for *Risk*. The panel, headed by Willard Wirtz, former secretary of labor, and including prominent educators like



The revolution in the schools began during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as radical critics hammered away at the public school system for whatever faults they discerned in American society.

PHOTOGRAPH FROM AP/WORLD WIDE PHOTOS

Harold Howe II, Ralph W. Tyler, Benjamin Bloom, and Robert L. Thorndike, concluded that most of the initial score decline, from 1963 to 1970, had been caused by changes in the composition of the pool of test-takers—that is, by increases in the number of low-scoring students who took the college-entry test. However, after 1970, scores fell even faster than before, and little of that decline was caused by the changing demography of the test-taking population (for an examination of the decline in SAT scores, see Paul Peterson, "Ticket to Nowhere," p. 39). Most of the post-1970 decline was the result of what the panel called "pervasive changes" in schools and society.

Of the school-based culprits, the panel

A Landmark Revisited

by ALBERT SHANKER

The following retrospective on A Nation at Risk *is reprinted from the American Federation of Teachers' "Where We Stand" column. It originally appeared on May 9, 1993.*

Recently I reread *A Nation at Risk*, the landmark report that started the education reform movement, and I was surprised at what I found. After 10 years, some of the words and ideas were still familiar, but I wasn't prepared for an exposition of what we would now call "systemic reform": figuring out what we want students to know and be able to do and making sure that all parts of the education system—standards, curriculum, textbooks, assessments, teacher training—move simultaneously toward the achievement of agreed-upon goals. This is the way successful school systems in other industrial democracies work, and it is why their students achieve at a much higher level than ours.

We didn't recognize the revolutionary thesis of *A Nation at Risk* because we associated the report with Ronald Reagan. He opposed a federal role for education, and the solutions he proposed for complicated problems were simple and mischievous—for example, merit pay and vouchers. In fact, the report came from an independent commission appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, who had a very different agenda.

Nevertheless, it was easy to ridicule something that emphasized the importance of subject matter and standards as an old-fashioned piece of nonsense. States that tried to implement *A Nation at Risk* picked a few parts that were relatively easy to carry out and ignored the rest. For example, course requirements were increased in some places without looking at course content or changing the tests to bring them in line with the courses or making grades count for students. This approach to reform is like trying to build a four-legged stool with only one leg, and it's no surprise that student achievement hardly improved.

What were the important recommendations of the systemic reform *A Nation at Risk* proposed?

- Along with a call for rigorous content and high standards, the report took a stab at defining content standards in some basic subjects. And recognizing that if there was a single set of performance standards, it would be fixed at a minimum level, the report recommended what successful education systems in other industrialized countries have—different standards because students function at different levels. At the same time, it stressed the necessity of demanding "the best effort and performance from all students" and giving them the help they would need to meet those demands.

- In order to see how well students were meeting standards, the report recommended a system of curriculum-based exams. These exams would contrast sharply with the standardized tests we then relied on and still do—that is, tests that are divorced from curriculum and merely show how students or schools compare with one another without any reference to a standard of achievement.

- While stressing that teachers were not responsible for the terrible condition of education, the report acknowledged what is still true—that it would be hard to raise standards when "not enough academically able students are being attracted to teach-regarded as most significant the fact that students were taking fewer basic academic courses and more nonacademic electives; studies from Massachusetts showed that schools had been adding such courses as "Film Making," even as course offerings in 11th-grade English and world history were being eliminated. The panel also pointed out that "less thoughtful and critical reading is now being demanded and done" and that "careful writing has apparently about gone out of style." The panel cast blame on absenteeism, social promotion, less homework being assigned, and a general lowering of standards. Coming as they did from a blue-ribbon commission with impeccable educationist credentials, these charges set the stage for *Risk* only six years later.

In the late 1970s, no one suggested that criticism of the education system was motivated by partisanship or that it emanated from "enemies of the public schools." In the closing years of the Carter administration, two presidentially appointed commissions lamented the flawed teaching of specific subject areas. In 1979 a commission created to examine foreign-language instruction in the United States concluded that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse." High-school enrollments in foreign-language study, it pointed out, had fallen from 24 percent of each grade in 1965 to 15 percent in the late 1970s. Only 1 of every 20 high-school students ever studied a second year of a foreign language. Colleges had ceased to require foreign-language study for admission, in response to campus revolts against requirements in the late 1960s, and high-school students had stopped taking foreign languages once it was no longer necessary for college admission. In 1980 another Carter-appointed commission lamented the condition of education in mathematics, science, and engineering; it pointed to lower standards in the

ing" and when teacher education leans so heavily on generic methods courses that teachers themselves say are worthless.

- The report found that colleges were partly responsible for poor student achievement. Because many of them had very low standards for admission, students were—and are—under no pressure to do well in high school. The report called on colleges to institute more "rigorous and measurable standards" to encourage higher student achievement.

A Nation at Risk was revolutionary in another way. At the time it appeared and since, many reports and studies have been fixated on teacher accountability for student achievement, ignoring the fact that in countries with successful school systems, students, not teachers, are held accountable for their achievement. This report supported student accountability, and that's the note on which it concluded. In the final pages, the authors addressed students directly, telling them that they were responsible, finally, for what they got out of school: "When you give only the minimum to learning, you get only the minimum in return. Even with your parents' best example and your teachers' best efforts, in the end it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn." *A Nation at Risk* got this right, too. Education reforms are useless unless our kids take responsibility for their education, the way students in other countries do.

Until we agree on standards for what students should know and be able to do, assess them on their achievement of those standards, and give them a reason to work hard in school by linking their achievement with what they want—access to college or to jobs—we will not raise student achievement. *A Nation at Risk* told us this 10 years ago, but we missed it. If we don't listen now, we'll have 10 more years without progress in student achievement.

–The late Albert Shanker was president of the American Federation of Teachers for 23 years. To view an archive of his "Where We Stand" columns, log on to www.nysut.org/shanker.

"Education reforms are useless unless our kids take responsibility for their education," legendary union leader Albert Shanker wrote a decade ago.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL CAMPBELL/COURTESY OF AFT

“To argue about whether there was a golden age of schooling is pointless. The real issue is whether today’s students are prepared for the challenges of the future.”

schools and to the weakening of college-entrance requirements as causes.

High Expectations

These earlier studies and critiques by highly respectable, nonpartisan agencies paved the way for *Risk*. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education began its deliberations in 1981, the public was already reacting against the pedagogical faddism and extremism of the 1970s. Schools that had torn down the walls between classrooms were rebuilding them; schools that had been built without walls were installing them. A noisy “back to basics” movement prompted several state legislatures to adopt new testing requirements for high-school graduation.

As it set to work, the National Commission solicited papers from educators. One of the most influential was Clifford Adelman’s study of high-school transcripts from 1964 to 1981. Adelman, a researcher at the U.S. Department of Education, concluded that during this period there had been a “systematic devaluation of academic (and some vocational) courses.” Students were spending less time in academic study and more time in nonacademic courses for which they received credit toward graduation. The typical high-school curriculum was divided into three tracks: academic, vocational, and general. As graduation requirements diminished, enrollment in the general track—which was neither academic nor vocational—jumped from 12 percent in the late 1960s to 42 percent by the late 1970s. Consisting of courses like driver education, general shop, business math, remedial studies, consumer education, and home economics, the general track had become the dominant “program” in American high schools.

One of the most important notions advanced by *Risk* was that schools should have high expectations for all children and should expect them to complete a reasonably demanding academic curriculum. This was a radical message. In the checkered history of reform-by-commission, only the 1893 Committee of Ten had made a similarly egalitarian claim on behalf of the intellectual capacity of all children. Ninety years later, *Risk* stated: “All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.”

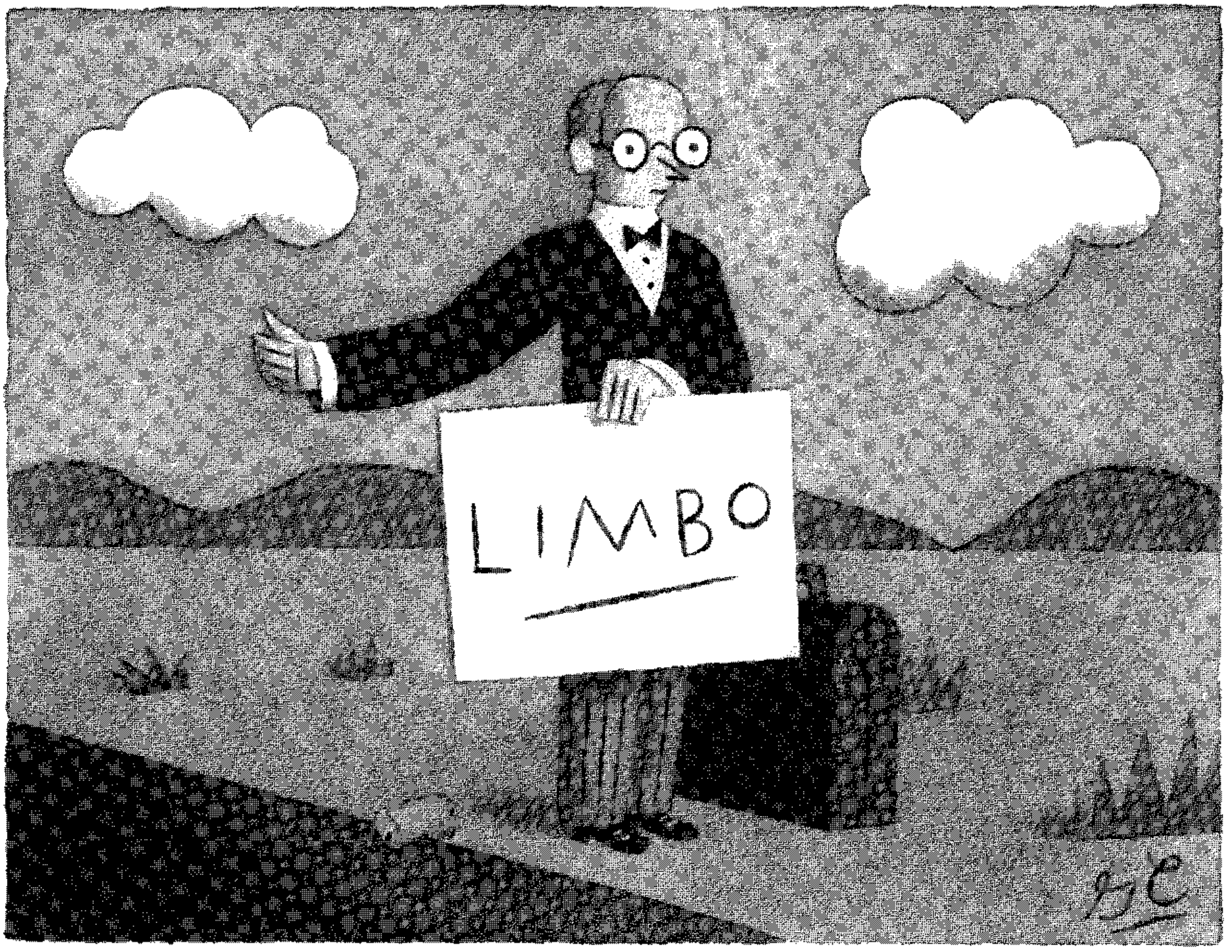
Among educators, this message was translated to mean, “All children can learn.” This earnest maxim repudiated the long-established practice of separating children into different programs on the basis of their likelihood of going to college. “All children can learn” changed the rules of the game in American education; it shifted the debate from discussions about access and resources to discussion about results. It was no longer enough to provide equal facilities; it became necessary to justify programs and expenditures on the basis of whether students made genuine gains. The rhetoric and philosophy of “all children can learn” had a large impact on education issues, as it became increasingly clear that educators needed not only to set higher expectations, but also to devise methods and incentives to get almost all students to learn more and to exert greater effort. After *Risk*, every state and school district scrutinized its standards and curricula, changed high-school graduation requirements, and insisted that students take more courses in academic subjects.

If a report may be said to have an Achilles’ heel, then *Risk*’s was its thesis of educational decline. Critics could rightly charge that the report had waxed nostalgic about an imaginary golden age. They could then blast this image with counterclaims that the schools were as good as ever, that any decline was a blip, and that a golden age never existed. We now know that the drop in test scores, which was real, actually ended about the time that *Risk* was released. But to argue about whether there was a golden age or whether the schools were better in 1983 than in 1973 or 1963 or 1953 is pointless. The issues are the same as they were a half-century ago, when Arthur Bestor wrote in *Educational Wastelands*:

> *If we are to have improvement, we must learn to make comparisons, not with the wretchedly inadequate public schools of earlier generations, but with the very best schools, public or private, American or foreign, past or present, of which we can obtain any knowledge. . . . If some other nation designs a better military plane, our aeronautical engineers do not point smugly to the fact that our own aircraft are better than they were in 1920 or 1930 or 1940.*

The challenge before us is, as it has always been, to secure equal educational opportunity. Every American child should have the same opportunities for an excellent education. All should have the same chance to maximize their potential, to contribute to the common good, and to live a full and rewarding life. The real issue always has been whether the schools are good enough to prepare students for the challenges that will confront them. For the schools of 2003 to be better than the schools of 1983 is no great feat. For the schools of 2003 to be among the best in the world is what matters most for students today and for the future of American society.

–Diane Ravitch is a research professor at New York University and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.



Ticket to Nowhere

In the wake of A Nation at Risk, *educators pledged to focus anew on student achievement. Two decades later, little progress has been made*

by PAUL E. PETERSON

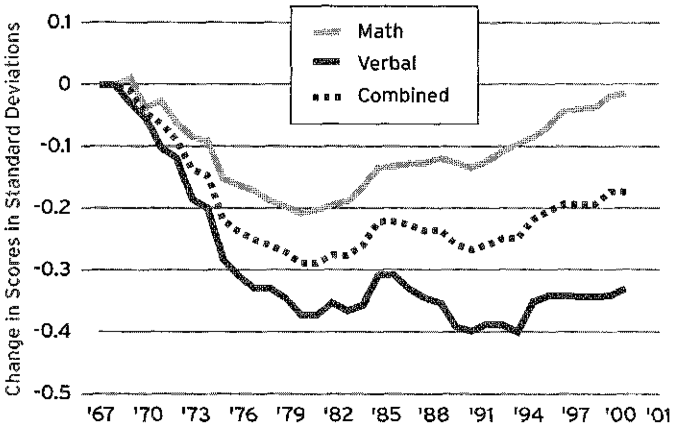
ILLUSTRATION BY GREG CLARKE

VERY LITTLE IN AMERICAN LIFE HAS REMAINED THE SAME SINCE THE release of *A Nation at Risk*. Automobiles run cleaner and safer, with the invention of the catalytic converter and the air bag. The Internet, fax, and cell phone have transformed communications. New pharmaceuticals, screening equipment, and surgical techniques have improved people's health outcomes and quality of life. Recreational equipment has become so sophisticated that sports can reach new extremes. All tastes and preferences in food are being catered to, from whole-bean coffee and organic foods to frozen pizzas that rival the quality of Domino's or Papa John's.

STILL AT RISK

Verbal, Math, and Combined SAT Scores, 1967-2001 (Figure 1)

SAT scores plummeted during the 1970s, reaching their nadir at about the time A Nation at Risk *was released. Math scores have since recovered, but verbal scores remain a third of a standard deviation lower than in 1967.*



Initial score set to zero; subsequent scores constitute changes in standard deviations relative to initial score. The reported standard deviation is the average standard deviation for the years 1972 to 2001.

SOURCE: College Entrance Examination Board

Indicators of social health have also moved in positive directions. The average child today is growing up in a more learning-friendly family environment than ever before. For one thing, parents are more educated. By 1999, the share of the population over age 25 with a high-school diploma or its equivalent had risen to 83 percent, up from 52 percent in 1970. A quarter of adults now hold college degrees, compared with just 11 percent in 1970. In addition, families are smaller, allowing parents to focus more attention on each child. The share of American families with three children or more declined from 36 percent in 1970 to 15 percent in 2000. Children also spend more of their lives in school: 69 percent of four-year-olds are now enrolled in preschool, compared with 29 percent in 1970. True, immigration has increased, and more children now live in homes where English is not the primary language (17 percent of all children today, compared with 8 percent in 1980). Today, 31 percent of all children do not live with both of their parents, up from 15 percent three decades ago. Yet poverty rates have remained essentially unchanged, average incomes have risen steeply, welfare dependency has declined, murder rates have dropped, and drug dependence has abated.

> “Today’s students are being raised in families that are smaller and better educated than the families of students in the 1970s, yet test scores remain stagnant.”

In short, many areas of American life have changed for the better during the past two decades—except, it appears, the K–12 education system. Data from various sources—the SAT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and international comparisons such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)—all reveal the same trend: despite 20 years of agitation and reform, much of it sparked by the *Risk* report, student achievement has at best stagnated, if not declined.

The Standard Deviation

The standard deviation is a statistical concept that will help to compare findings from a variety of assessments. This concept provides a measure of how much scores are spread around their average. In general, a full standard deviation (or 1.0 standard deviations) is considered very large. On the NAEP, for example, a standard deviation is equivalent to roughly the four years of learning between the 4th and 8th grades. If 4th graders score one standard deviation higher than average on the NAEP 4th-grade test, they are performing as well as the average 8th grader would have. Conversely, if low-performing 8th graders score a standard deviation below average on the 8th-grade exam, they are performing no better than the average 4th grader would have.

A full standard deviation also represents the amount by which the performance of Japanese middle schoolers exceeds that of their American peers on the TIMSS math exam. In a more home-grown example, it is the difference between the performance of white and African-American children in math—the so-called black-white test-score gap. This helps to explain why a change of just 50 percent of a standard deviation (0.5 of a standard deviation) is considered substantial, particularly if the change occurs within a few years. Changes of 10 percent of a standard deviation are usually considered to be quite small, but even small changes can become big ones if they accumulate over time. If student achievement in America had increased by an average of just 4 percent of a standard deviation in each year of the past two decades, overall test scores would have climbed by nearly 120 percent of a standard deviation. Such a dramatic transformation of the education system surely would have inspired a raft of popular books, with titles like *$chool Dayz: What Corporate America Can Learn from Public Education*. Instead, schools are being asked to take lessons from the business world.

The SAT

The SAT, the admissions exam that most college-bound high schoolers take during their junior or senior years, has several advantages as a yardstick. For one thing, it has been used to measure student performance for decades, giving psychometricians many opportunities to refine the test. For another, it is a high-stakes test. Students' performance on the SAT affects their chances of getting into the colleges of their choice and of earning a scholarship. As a result, many students take the test seriously, studying sample questions to familiarize themselves with its general format and approach.

It also has certain limitations. Foremost is the fact that the SAT is generally taken only by college-bound high schoolers. Indeed, not even all of these students take the test. Many four-year colleges don't require the SAT for admission; some colleges accept the ACT Assessment instead. Most junior or community colleges don't require either test. The upshot: in 2000, only 46 percent of high-school seniors took the SAT.

To the extent that the percentage of seniors taking the test varies from year to year, scores can fluctuate for this reason alone. Critics of school reform often ascribe the drop in SAT scores to the fact that the share of high-school seniors taking the test has been increasing during the post–World War II period, potentially diluting the skills of the test-taking pool. However, studies have found that the decline in SAT scores during the 1960s and 1970s was only partially caused by a change in the social composition of those taking the test. The percentage of high-school seniors taking the test hovered at around 33 percent between 1972 and 1984, after which the share climbed to about 45 percent in 1990 and then essentially leveled off. Meanwhile, the drop in SAT scores occurred during the 1970s, when participation rates were stable. The modest revival in SAT scores occurred during the 1980s, when participation rates were actually *rising*.

Figure 1 illustrates the trend in average SAT scores between 1967 and 2001. Between 1967 and 1982, students' combined math and verbal scores fell by nearly 30 percent of a standard deviation, a troubling slide that precipitated the writing of *Risk*. Scores began to rise again in 1982, but the gains were modest: only about 15 percent of a standard deviation by 1999, or less than 1 percent per year, leaving the country well below its standing in 1967.

Now let's look at the trends in math and verbal skills separately (see Figure 1). The difference is striking. The decline in math was never as steep, just 20 percent of a standard deviation. And by 2001, math scores were back to their 1967 levels. Meanwhile, average verbal scores remain 35 percent of a standard deviation below their 1967 levels.

Can we thank *Risk* for the more positive trend in math, at least as compared with verbal scores? On the one hand, *Risk* called attention to the shortage of qualified math and science teachers, but, as Caroline Hoxby reports in this issue (see "Reforms for Whom?" on page 47), teachers were even less likely to have a degree in these subjects in 1999 than in 1982. On the other hand, *Risk* promoted a more rigorous academic curriculum, and the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increase in the number of academically oriented math and science courses taken by high-school graduates (see Hoxby). Nonetheless, even SAT math scores are no higher today than they were in 1967.

> "U.S. students' average verbal SAT scores remain 35 percent of a standard deviation below their 1967 levels."

If more academic courses in math had positive effects on student learning in this subject area, why didn't the introduction of more high-school English courses after the release of *A Nation at Risk* have a similar effect? The answer to this question remains elusive. Perhaps, as E. D. Hirsch Jr. suggests (see "Not So Grand a Strategy" on page 68), elementary schools' adoption of the "whole language" approach to reading instruction in lieu of phonics left many high schoolers unequipped to read challenging material. Maybe high-school teachers have given up trying to provide rigorous instruction in reading comprehension, letting students focus instead on their personal responses to the material. The syntax and range of expression in students' textbooks may have been unduly simplified. Perhaps instruction in math, with its more structured curriculum and clearer set of standards, has remained much the same, though Williamson Evers and Paul Clopton (see "The Least Common Denominator" on page 73) suggest otherwise. Whatever the causes, the results are clear—the verbal skills of the college-bound, even more than their mathematical ones, have remained well below those of their predecessors a couple of generations ago.

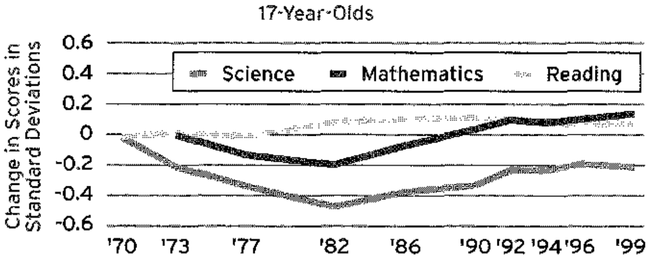
National Assessment of Educational Progress

While the SAT captures only the performance of high-school seniors who are thinking of going to college, NAEP is more inclusive. It surveys samples of students representing all high-school seniors—and two younger cohorts as well. Known as the "Nation's Report Card" and housed within the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP tests in math, science, and reading have been regularly administered to a representative sample of students at ages 9, 13, and 17 since the early 1970s.

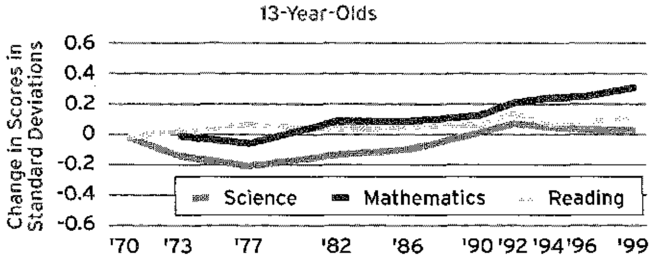
NAEP's limitations differ importantly from those of the SAT. Most significant is the fact that individual schools may elect not to participate in NAEP. Even when a school agrees to participate, not every student does. And participation rates have fallen noticeably since the 1970s, especially among older

Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress by Age Group, 1970-1999 (Figure 2)

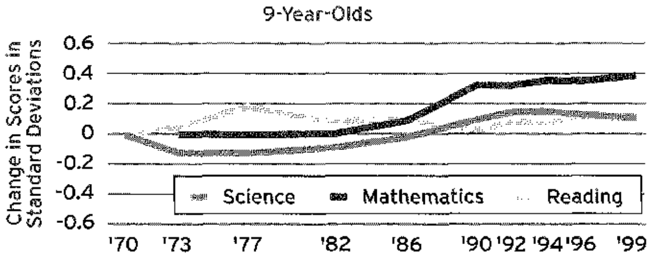
The nation appears to have made some strides at the elementary level, but for older students achievement has remained stagnant. Moreover, the flatlined scores cannot be attributed to immigration, since the scores of non-Hispanic white 17-year-olds track the national trend.



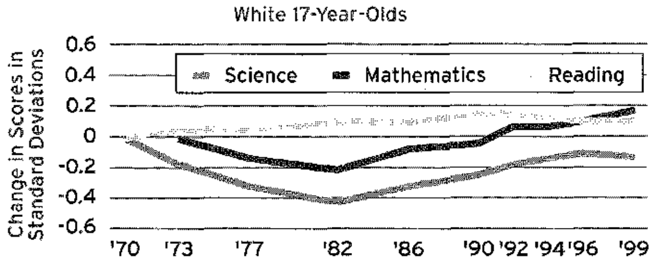
Initial score set to zero; subsequent scores expressed as changes in standard deviations relative to initial score. Initial science and math scores obtained in 1970; in reading, initial score obtained in 1973. Standard deviation is the average standard deviation for the years 1970 to 1996 (45.4 points in science, 31.4 in math, and 42.2 in reading).



Standard deviation 36.4 in science, 32.7 in math, and 36.8 in reading.



Standard deviation 41.5 in science, 33.9 in math, and 36.8 in reading.



Standard deviation 45.4 in science, 31.4 in math, and 42.2 in reading.

SOURCE: U. S. Department of Education

students. The joint school-student participation rate for 17-year-olds dropped from 68 percent in 1973 to 58 percent in 1999. At the same time, the participation rate for 13-year-olds slid from 79 percent to 74 percent. (Changes in participation rates were less pronounced for the 9-year-olds.)

In general, one expects low-performing schools to be the most likely to refuse to participate and students who are performing poorly to be the most likely to be excused from participation or absent on the day of the test. If this expectation is correct, then apparent performance gains could be due simply to declines in participation rates. The Educational Testing Service attempts to account for nonparticipation by statistically adjusting NAEP scores, but its efforts are limited by the data available, making it likely that declining rates have by themselves elevated test scores. Among 17-year-olds especially, year-to-year changes in participation rates are correlated with year-to-year fluctuations in average test-score performance, suggesting that falling rates have inflated recent NAEP scores.

Bearing this in mind, let's examine the pattern of change in NAEP test scores among 17-year-olds, most of whom were tested in their last year of high school. Between 1973 and 1999, their NAEP math scores climbed by about 10 percent of a standard deviation (see Figure 2). During roughly the same time period, their reading scores rose by about 8 percent. However, the gains may be apparent, not real, due simply to the 10 percentage point slide in participation rates.

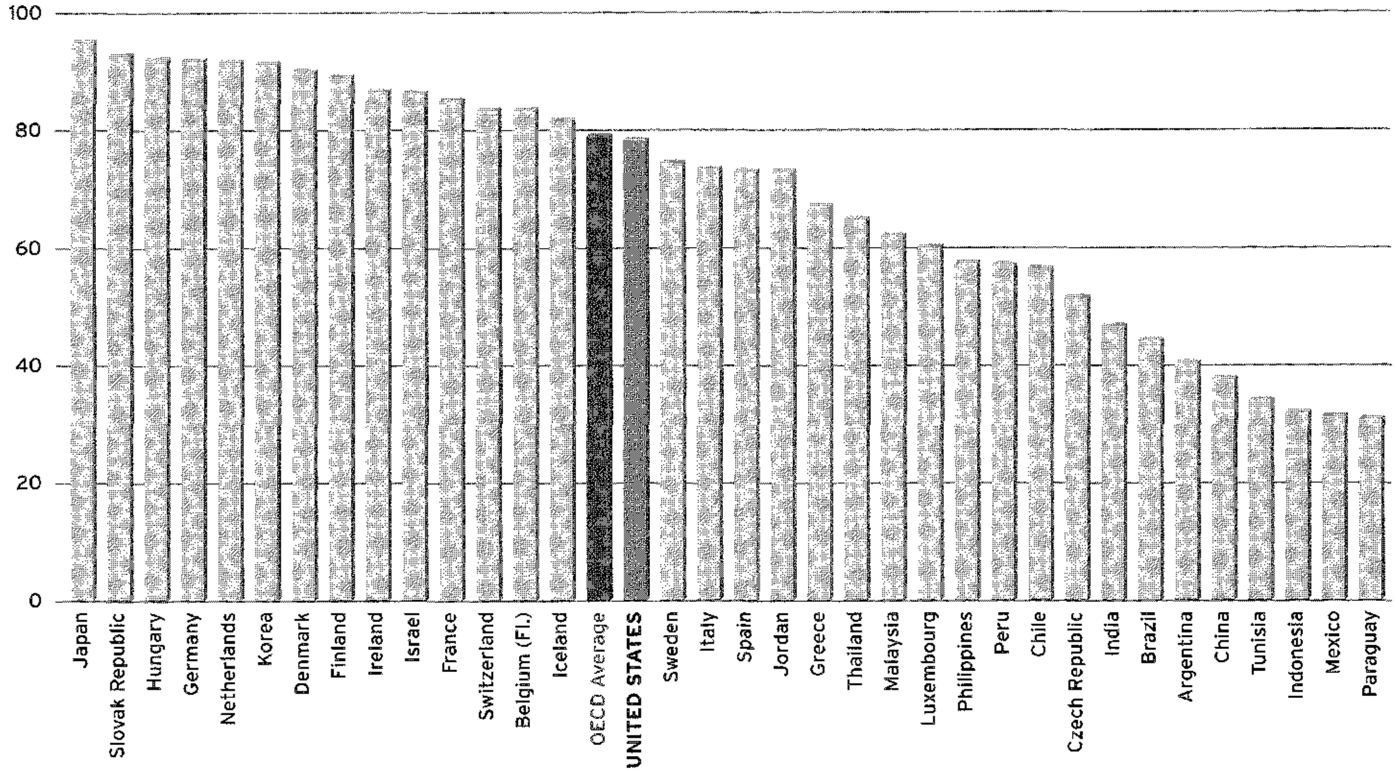
Meanwhile, the NAEP science scores of 17-year-olds dropped by 20 percent of a standard deviation. The downward shift occurred during the 1970s, when scores fell by as much as 50 percent of a standard deviation. Though they gained some ground in the past two decades, students in 1999 were still not performing as well in science as they had been in the early 1970s. Furthermore, some of the apparent recovery may have been artificial, once again the by-product of declines in participation. Taken as a whole, NAEP results for 17-year-olds, like results from the SAT, suggest that the performance of the nation's schoolchildren has hardly moved in the course of 30 years.

The picture is only slightly brighter among 13-year-olds (see Figure 2). Their reading scores barely improved between 1970 and 1999, a gain so small it, too, may simply be due to the drop in participation. Meanwhile, science scores dropped by 20 percent of a standard deviation during the 1970s, recovered during the 1980s, and then slipped in the 1990s, ending up about where they had been in 1970. The lone bright spot is in math, where scores rose by as much as 30 percent of a standard deviation over the three decades.

Scores improved the most among 9-year-olds, the youngest cohort tested by NAEP (see Figure 2). Their math scores rose by nearly 40 percent of a standard deviation between 1973 and 1999, an encouraging sign. However, their gains in reading and science were much smaller, only 5 percent and 10 percent of a standard deviation, respectively.

International Secondary-School Completion Rates (Figure 3)

The United States once led the world in terms of quantity of schooling provided, but its high-school graduation rate has slipped to slightly below the average among industrialized nations.



SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1999

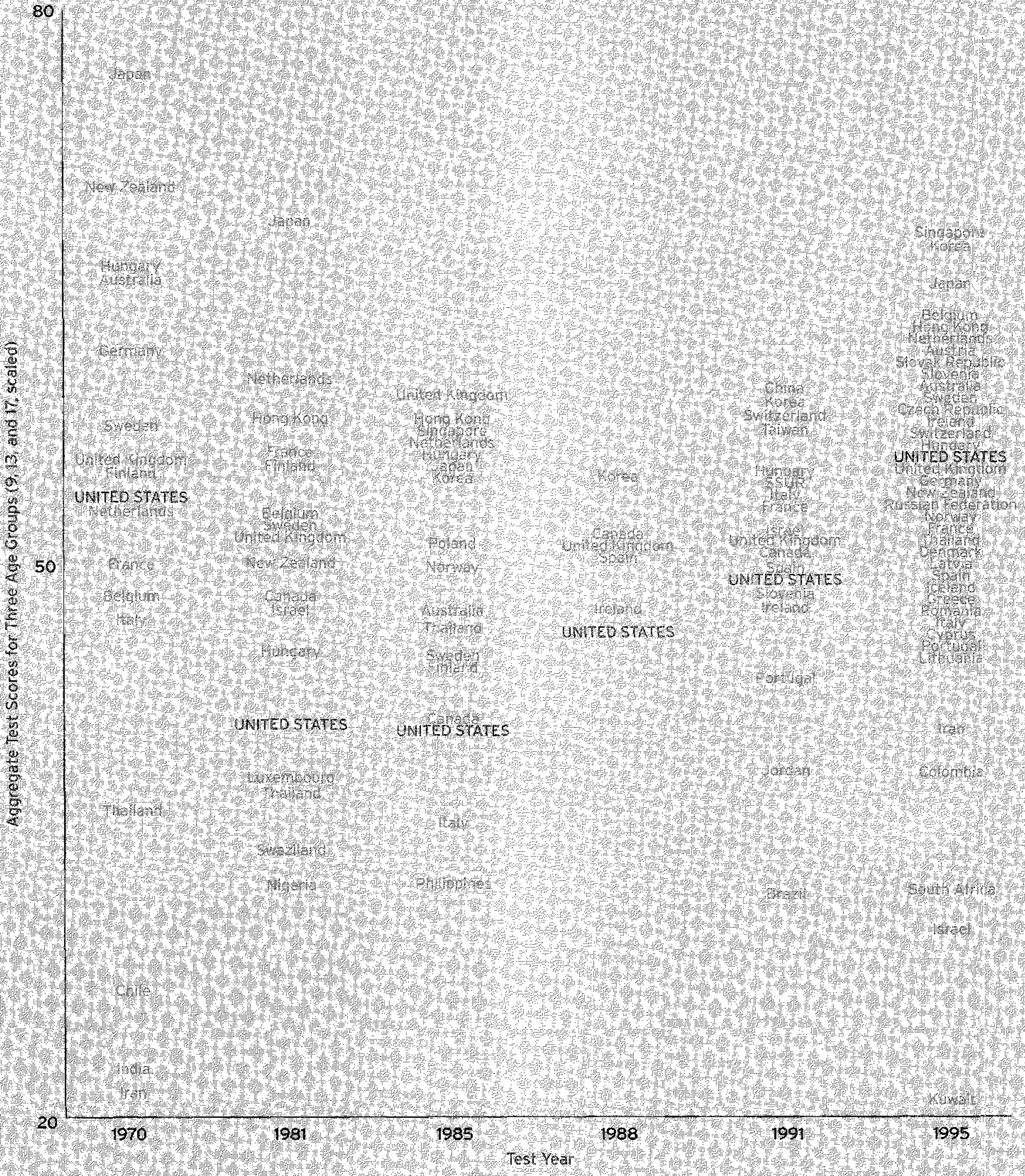
Some critics have attributed the stagnation of test scores to social phenomena outside the schools' control, especially the influx of immigrants from third world countries in the past three decades. After all, if these families have weak educational backgrounds and speak little English, their children may perform poorly on standardized tests. To explore this possibility, let's examine the achievement trend of white 17-year-olds, a group that includes only a few immigrants, most of whom came from advanced industrialized societies where the schools are at least as good as those in the United States. Trends in NAEP performance among 17-year-old white students, as Figure 2 shows, closely track the trends for all students. Their reading scores rose slightly (10 percent of a standard deviation) before *A Nation at Risk* was issued, but have not increased since. Math scores declined noticeably (20 percent of a standard deviation) before the release of *Risk*, but have climbed back to somewhat above their 1970 level. Science scores fell sharply before 1983 and have recovered only about half their losses. Taking into account the declining participation rates, one must conclude that the performance of white 17-year-olds remained essentially flat over the past 30 years. The influx of immigrants from third world countries is not to blame for stagnation in education.

An optimist might still argue that schools have offset family deterioration or other social trends. But this ignores the dramatic improvements in family education, economic well-being, and family size mentioned earlier—as well as the fact that family effects should be most noticeable among the youngest students, the very group where stagnation is least apparent. The optimist may also interpret these results as showing that the

> “NAEP results for 17-year-olds, like results from the SAT, suggest that the performance of the nation's schoolchildren has hardly moved in the course of 30 years.”

Running in Place (Figure 4)

Results from exams administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (the most recent of which was the TIMSS) show the same disappointing pattern as the United States exhibits on the SAT and NAEP. The U.S. average scores were almost exactly the same in the mid-1990s as they were in the early 1970s.



SOURCE: See essay by Eric Hanushek in Paul E. Peterson, ed., *Our Schools and Our Future: Are We Still at Risk?* (Hoover Institution, 2003) reforms recommended by *A Nation at Risk* are taking hold slowly, initially influencing the education of young students, who will sustain—and perhaps accelerate—their gains as their schooling continues. But there is little basis for such comforting notions. The science scores of 9-year-olds shifted upward between 1986 and 1992, but this did not translate into gains when they reached the age of 13. Likewise, 9-year-olds made dramatic gains in math between 1986 and 1990, but the performance of 13-year-olds was far less impressive. When the same cohort became 17 in 1996, no gain could be detected. What had been achieved by age 9 had been lost altogether by age 17.

To the pessimist, these results reveal a school system in decline. Today's students are being raised in families that are smaller and better educated than the families of students in the 1970s. Inasmuch as research has shown that family size and parents' education are the most important family-based determinants of a child's cognitive ability, positive changes there could in fact account for the test-score gains of 9-year-olds. But in subsequent years, schools are not making use of what young children are learning—at home or at school.

Internationally Speaking

The American education system has elicited few, if any, achievement gains in recent decades. Of course, this wouldn't be of much concern if the United States was a world-beater in international comparisons of student performance.

Historically, the United States has compared favorably with other nations in its education practices. It was the first country to achieve universal elementary education, the first to expand its secondary system to include the vast majority of students, and the first to establish an open, highly competitive, and world-renowned system of higher education. As late as 1970, a higher percentage of U.S. teenagers completed secondary education than did their peers in any other nation.

By the late 1990s, however, the United States no longer held the advantage in secondary-school completion rates; it had fallen to the average among the advanced industrial democracies that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ranking behind Japan, Korea, Germany, France, Ireland, and other European countries (see Figure 3). Moreover, this is just a measure of the *quantity* of schooling provided by a nation; the United States also trails other industrialized nations in the quality of education it provides.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) has administered tests of math and science in countries around the world since the 1960s. The most recent of these is the TIMSS. (IEA has forgone tests of verbal skill because it thinks that language differences might invalidate international comparisons of verbal ability.) Most of the advanced industrial democracies participate in the survey, along with several developing countries.

> “The U.S. standing in the world deteriorates as students advance through their education. By age 17, the United States outranks only Lithuania, Cyprus, and South Africa.”

Results from the IEA tests place the United States in the middle of the pack internationally, scoring well below the average of the highest-performing countries—Singapore, Korea, Japan, Belgium, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Austria. The U.S. average scores were almost exactly the same in the mid-1990s as they were in the early 1970s (see Figure 4). In other words, the IEA tests reveal the same stagnant pattern as the SAT and NAEP.

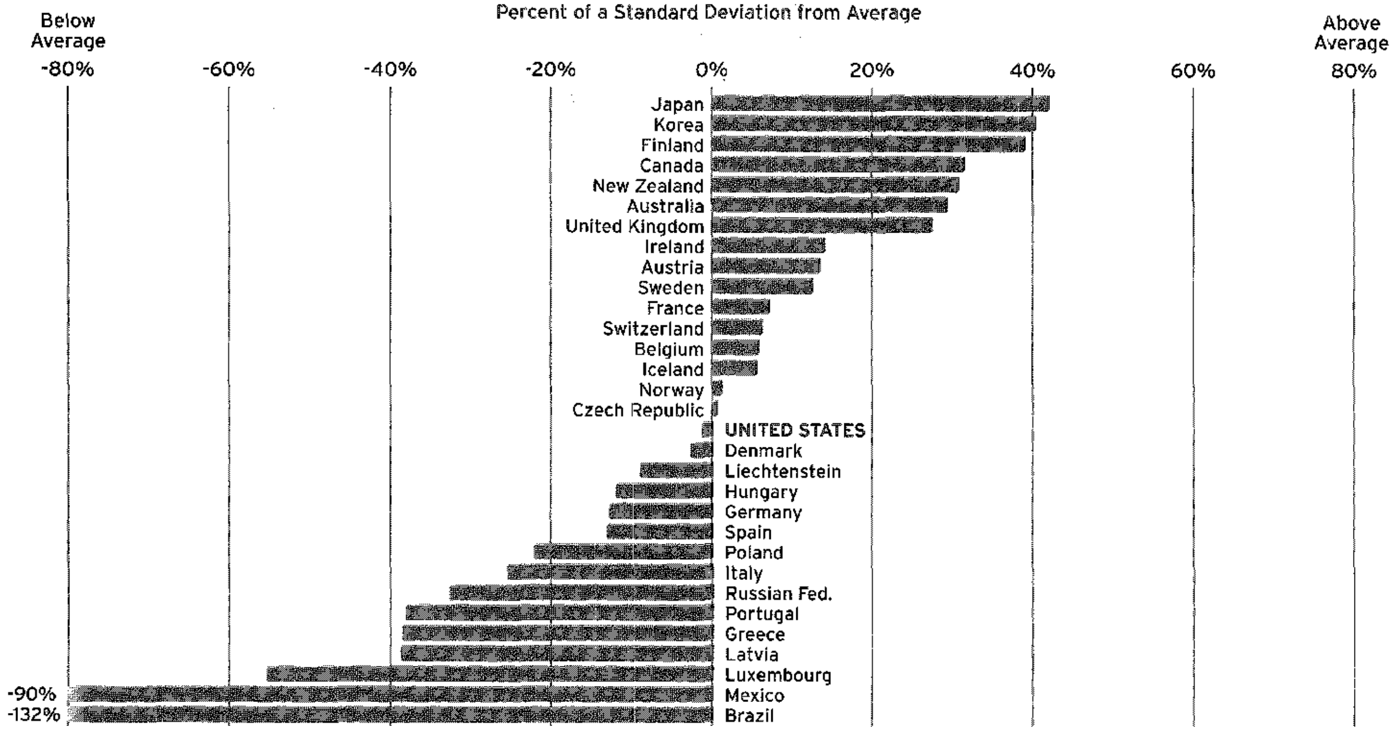
More troublesome is the fact that the U.S. standing in the world deteriorates as students advance through their education. As Eric Hanushek has shown, they score above the international average at age 9, though their average score is still 60 percent of a standard deviation below that of the highest-performing country (Korea) and 20 percent below that of the Netherlands. At age 13, however, they slip below the international average, a full standard deviation behind world-leading Singapore and 50 percent below the Netherlands. By age 17, the United States outranks only Lithuania, Cyprus, and South Africa, falling nearly a full standard deviation behind the Netherlands (Korea and Singapore did not participate in this survey). These results are consistent with those from the NAEP: progress among younger American children, but not sustained as they age. These outcomes cannot be explained away by claiming that the United States is testing, at age 17, a broader swath of students than other nations are. As we have seen, the United States is no longer the world leader in secondary education.

Making matters worse is the fact that the IEA tests students in math and science, areas where U.S. students have made some gains in the past two decades. Meanwhile, according to the data from the SAT, American 17-year-olds have never really recovered from their precipitous drop in verbal scores 30 years ago. Until recently, no international testing student survey had been conducted in reading. But in 2000, the OECD conducted its own international survey of what it refers to as reading, math, and science literacy. It surveyed 15-year-olds in 31 countries, almost all of them advanced industrial democracies.

Overall, the findings from the OECD and IEA surveys are very similar: the average combined score of U.S. students in all

Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) Combined Scores in Reading, Math, and Science for 15-Year-Olds (Figure 5)

The United States falls at about the average in international comparisons of student achievement, leaving the nation 40 percent of a standard deviation below the highest-performing countries.



SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Program for International Student Assessment, 2000

three subjects falls at about the international average, trailing students in the highest-performing countries, Japan, Korea, and Finland, by more than 40 percent of a standard deviation (see Figure 5).

In reading, the United States ranks 15th among the 31 participating countries, 45 percent of a standard deviation behind Finland, the world leader. One might attribute this to the fact that English is a difficult language to learn—except that the United States was the lowest scoring of all the English-speaking countries. Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Ireland all ranked higher. So did Korea, Japan, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Norway, and France. The results in math and science were equally dismal.

Still another international comparison, this provided by the International Adult Literacy Survey, provides a different way of assessing the quality of education in the United States. It was administered during the mid-1990s to a cross-section of 16- to 65-year-olds in 14 European and North American countries.

The United States ranked 12th on the test, trailing Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Germany by significant margins. The news gets even worse: the United States appears to be living on its past. The literacy skills of Americans aged 56 to 65 ranked them second in the world. These highfliers had attended school in the 1950s, at a time when SAT scores reached heights to which they have never since returned—and Europeans were still trying to put together an education system that could serve more than an elite cadre.

Americans who went to school during the 1960s ranked a respectable 3rd; those schooled in the 1970s ranked 5th. But 16- to 25-year-olds, adults who were wandering America's school hallways during the 1980s and 1990s, ranked 14th. In short, the literacy survey records a simple, steady progression downward. Apologists will find excuses for these outcomes, of course. The downward U.S. trajectory is due more to gains elsewhere than to slippage within the United States, some will say, as if this were satisfying. Others may say that U.S. scores are pulled down by its immigrants and ethnic diversity, overlooking the fact that other countries have immigrants too. Lifelong learning opportunities are greater in the United States than elsewhere, it will be claimed, so young folks will eventually reach the levels the oldest group has achieved. No matter that schools are bad; catch-up time will come later on.

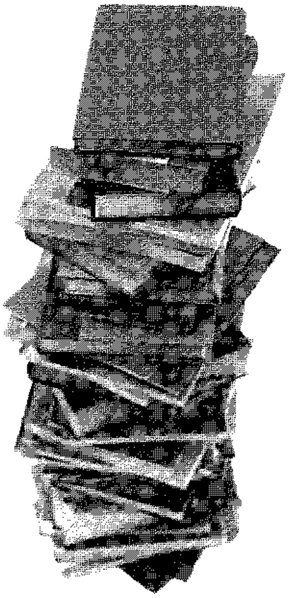
But such excuses don't ring true, especially when the literacy test only confirms results from the IEA, the OECD survey, NAEP, and the SAT. No one test can provide the definitive assessment of American education. But when multiple studies yield similar results, the story they tell becomes ever more compelling. By all accounting devices available, the nation at risk 20 years ago has not responded adequately to the challenge set forth in 1983.

–Paul E. Peterson is a professor of government at Harvard University, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and editor-in-chief of Education Next.

REFORMS FOR WHOM?

The most successful of the changes proposed by A Nation at Risk were those that enjoyed backing from powerful interest groups in education

by CAROLINE M. HOXBY



The core of *A Nation at Risk* was its concern that America's public schools were not challenging enough to prepare students for a future built on technology and information. Students, *Risk* said, were not taking enough academic courses. Expectations for students were set too low, evidenced by the fact that grades for coursework often failed to correlate with students' scores on independent exams. Too little of the day was spent in class or doing homework. The school year was too short. Too few teachers were qualified to teach math and science. Finally, teachers were being drawn mainly from the bottom of the achievement distribution among college students.

Risk's recommendations focused on solving the problems in four areas: curriculum, expectations, time, and teaching. Twenty years later, progress on these recommendations has been spotty and altogether disappointing. Substantial progress has been made in the area of curriculum, where *Risk*'s recommendations could be fulfilled by rule changes, such as increasing requirements for graduation. A much larger share of students is taking an academic slate of courses (see Figures 1–3). But whether the content of these courses is actually any more difficult is impossible to tell. Progress has also been made on recommendations that required real change, *if* they were supported by powerful interest groups in education, especially the teacher unions. For instance, teachers have seen real increases in salary, though the average salary of other college graduates grew at a higher rate during the boom years of the 1990s (see Figures 4 & 5).

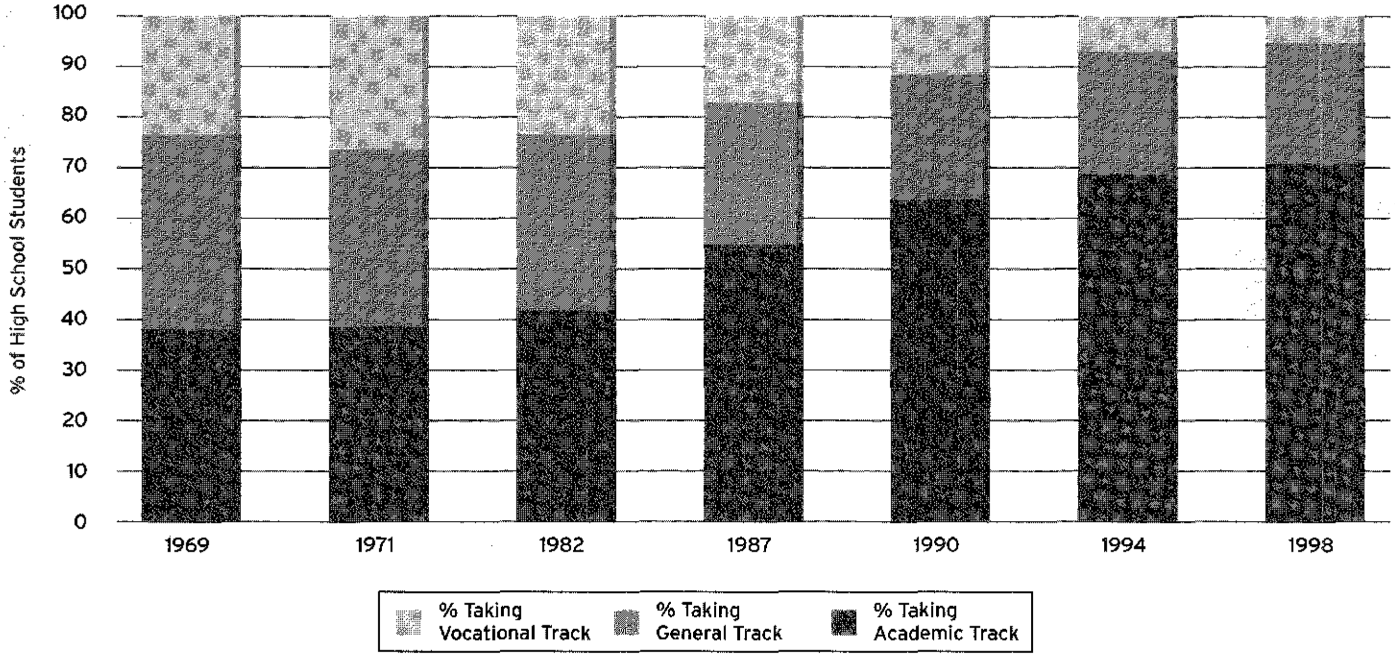
The authors of *A Nation at Risk* were opposed to "more of the same": more spending on the same old curriculum without fundamental changes in expectations and time use. Nevertheless, powerful interest groups were able to use the climate of urgency created by the report to get their own preferred policies enacted, even when the policies were not recommended by *Risk*. For instance, per-pupil spending has risen sharply while class size has fallen significantly (see Figures 6–8). The same interest groups were able to block some *Risk* recommendations that would have required real changes, such as lengthening the school year and assigning more homework (see Figures 9–11).

–Caroline M. Hoxby is a professor of economics at Harvard University and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

STILL AT RISK?

Squeezing Out the Vocational Track (Figure 1)

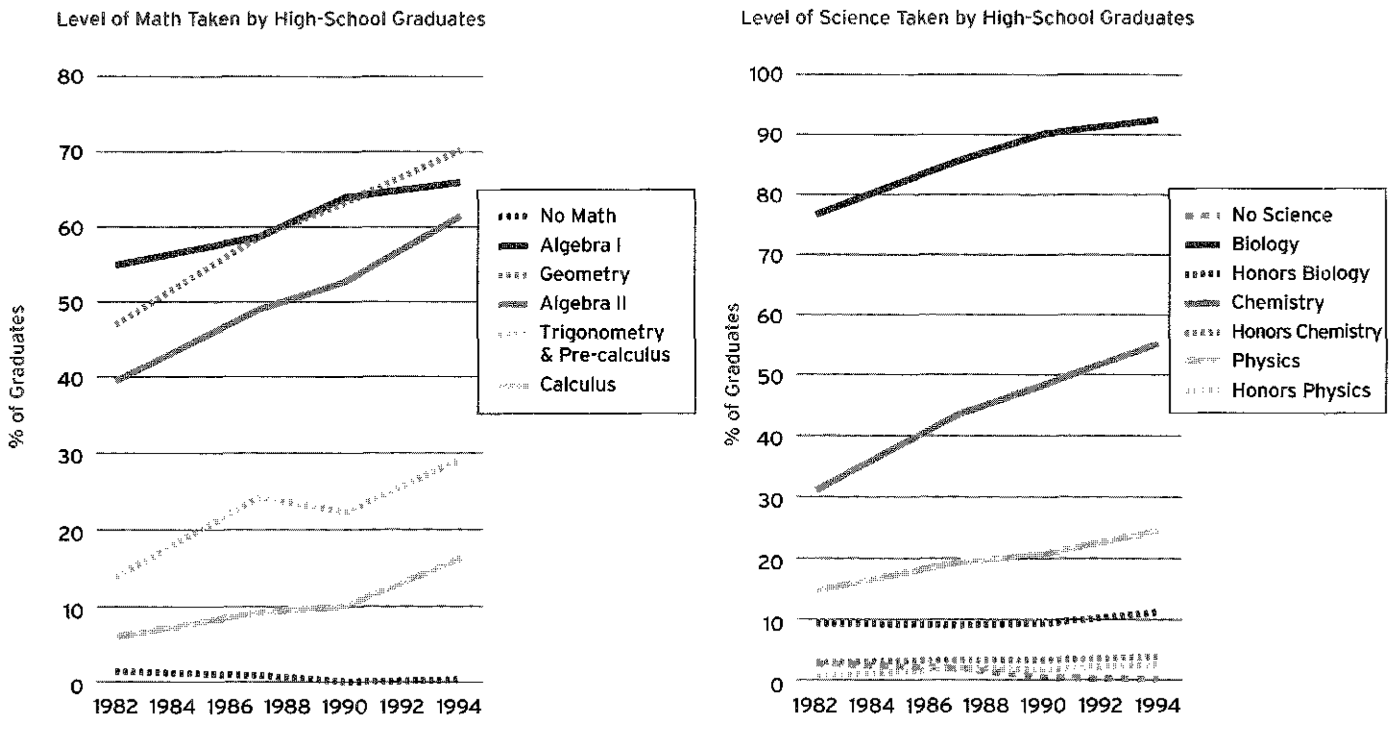
A Nation at Risk *urged the nation to refocus its schools on academics, and the schools at least appear to have answered the call. Whether this represents a real increase in rigor, however, is nearly impossible to know.*



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

Tougher Math and Science Courses (Figure 2 and Figure 3)

The share of students taking apparently challenging courses such as Calculus, Trigonometry, Algebra II, Physics, and Chemistry has increased across the board.


Level of Math Taken by High-School Graduates

Level of Science Taken by High-School Graduates

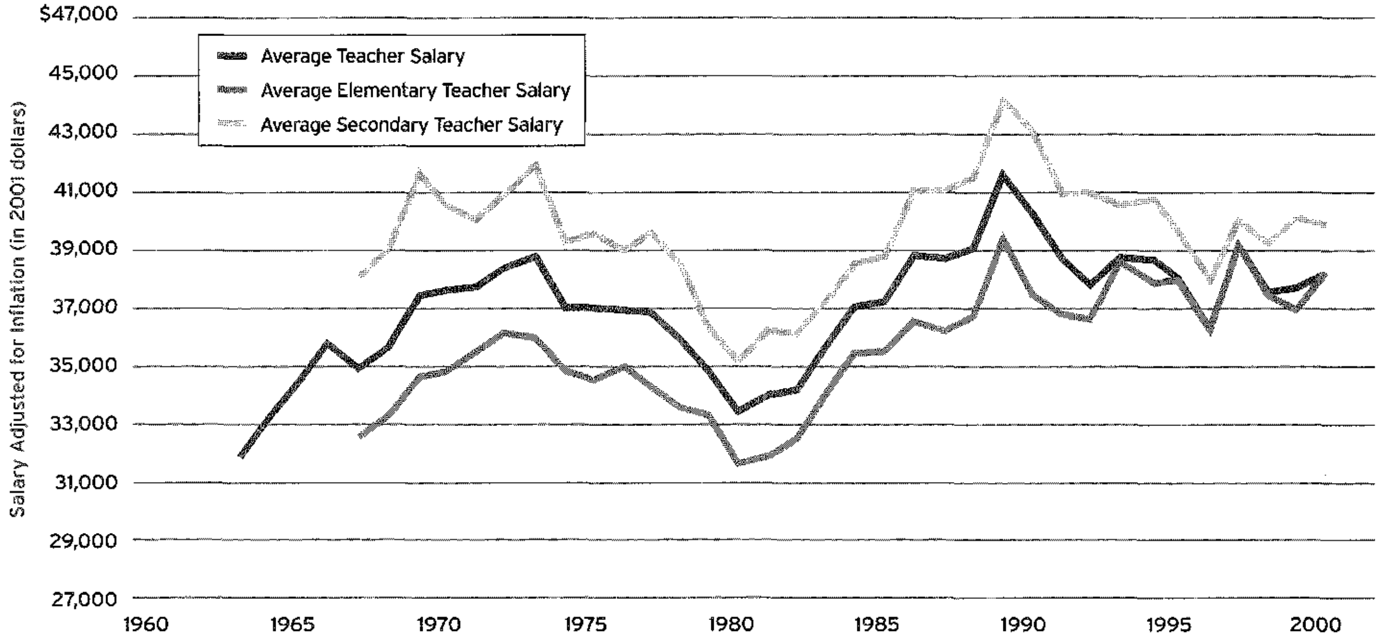
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

Ahead, But Still Behind (Figure 4 and Figure 5)

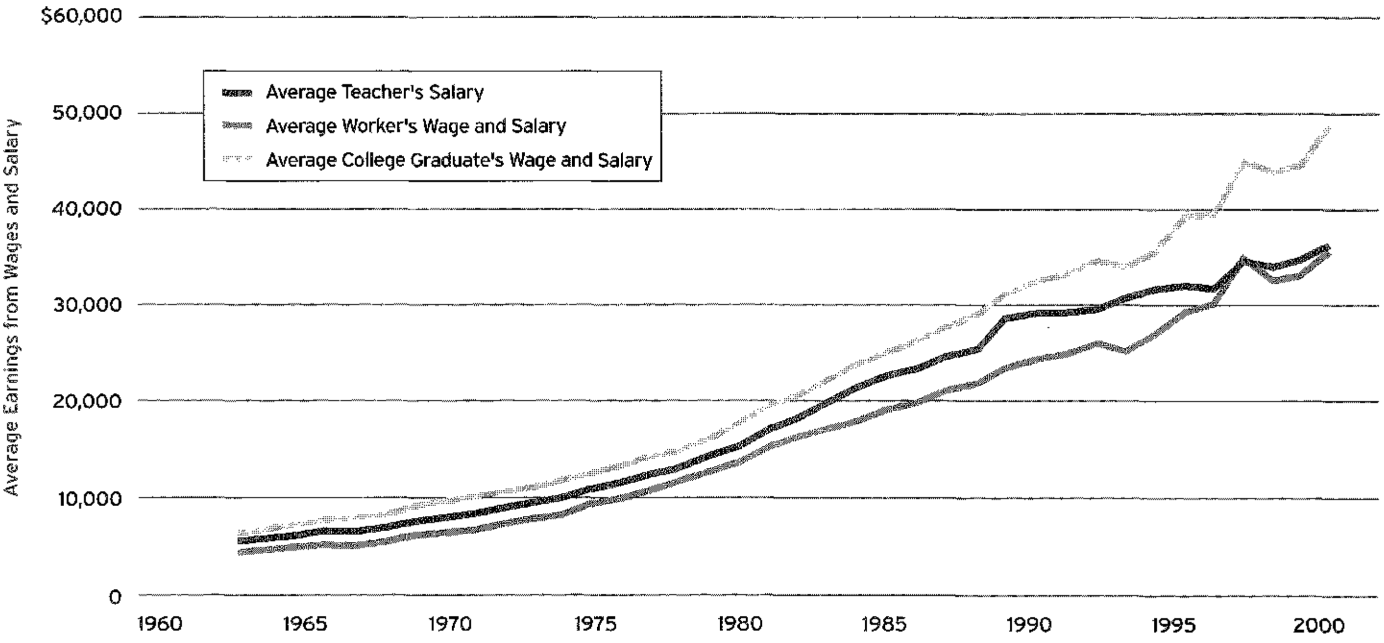
A Nation at Risk *recommended that teachers be paid higher salaries—a policy backed by powerful interest groups. The ensuing two decades saw a 12 percent increase in teachers' salaries after adjusting for inflation, but they had in fact fallen further behind the average college graduate in relative terms.*

Average Teacher Salary (in inflation-adjusted 2001 dollars)



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

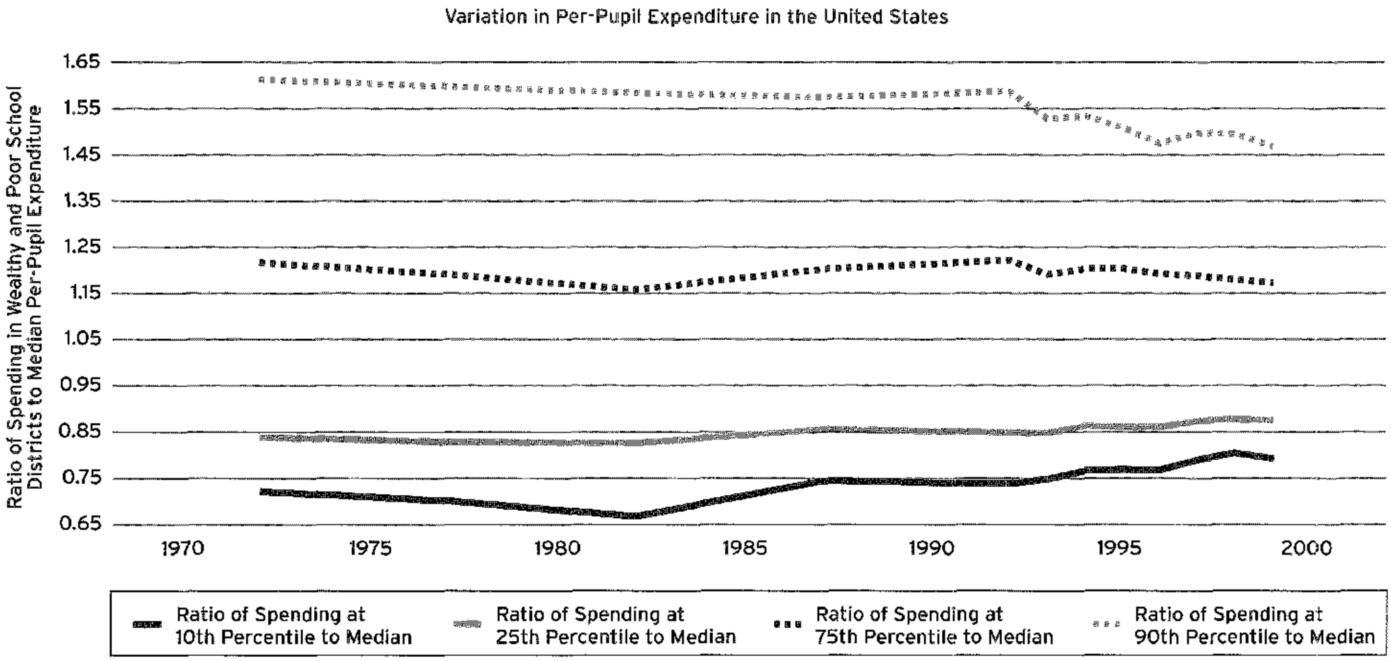
Average Salaries for Teachers, College Graduates, and Workers (not adjusted for inflation)



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Increasing Equity (Figure 6) ...

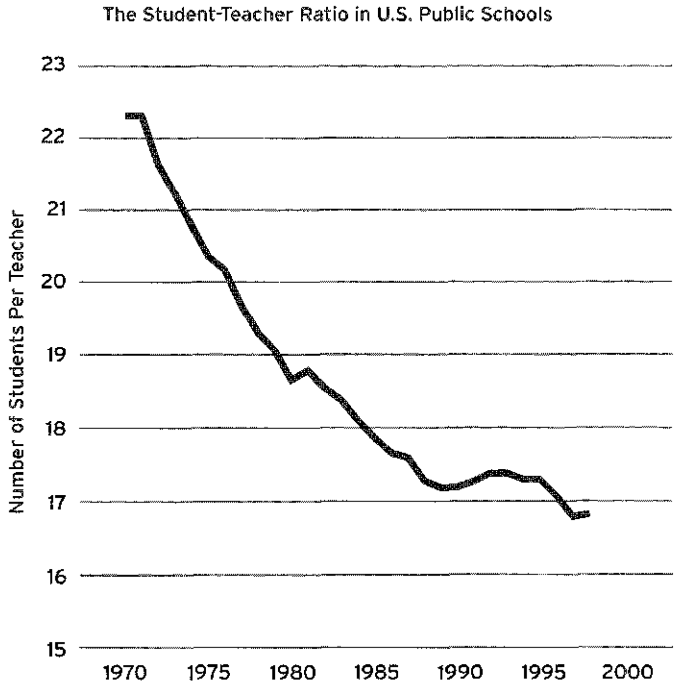
School-finance lawsuits and increased federal spending on compensatory education have combined to boost spending in poor districts, thus narrowing the money gap.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Bureau of the Census

... And Reducing Class Sizes (Figure 7) ...

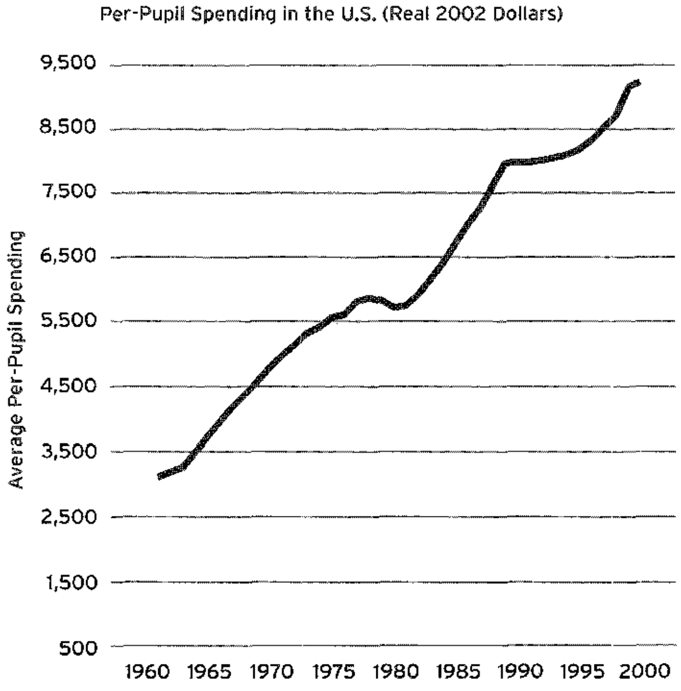
The student-teacher ratio has dropped dramatically in the past 30 years, an enormously expensive reform.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

... Has Proven Expensive (Figure 8)

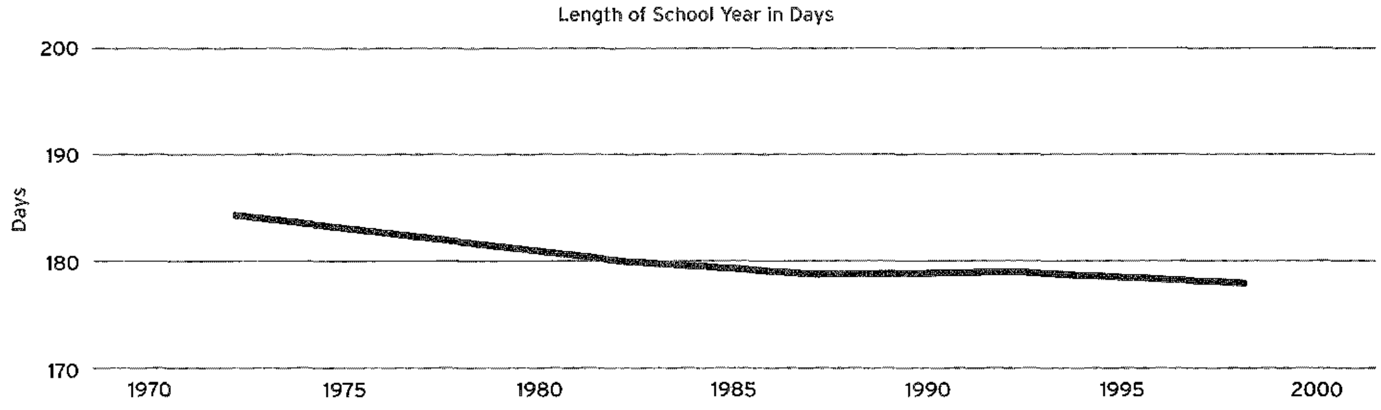
Increased spending in disadvantaged school districts, higher teacher salaries, and reduced class sizes have resulted in a dramatic rise in average spending since A Nation at Risk *was released.*



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

The Agricultural Schedule (Figure 9)

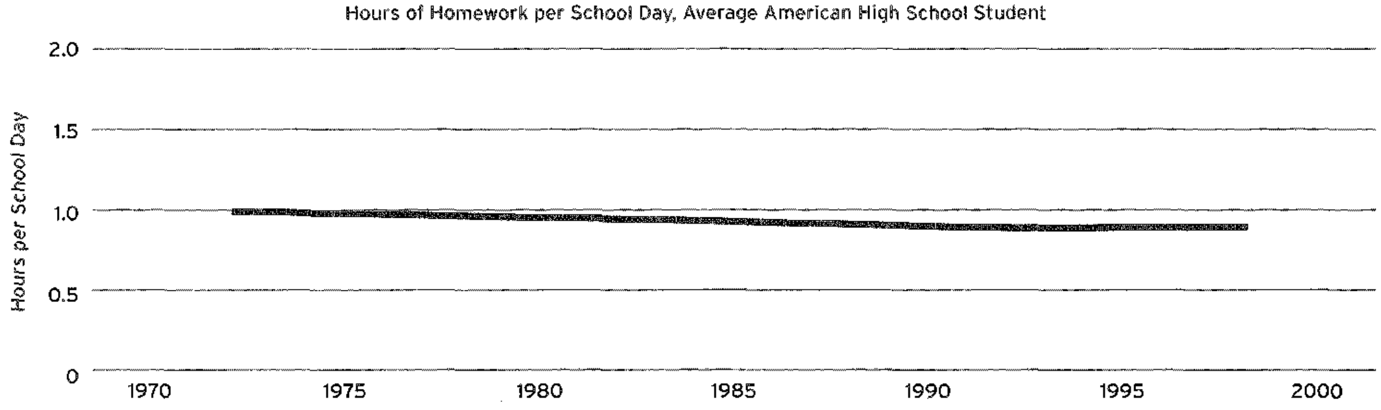
A Nation at Risk *recommended that the school year, originally designed for a rural society, be lengthened, but it has actually grown shorter over the past three decades.*



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

The Homework Myth (Figure 10)

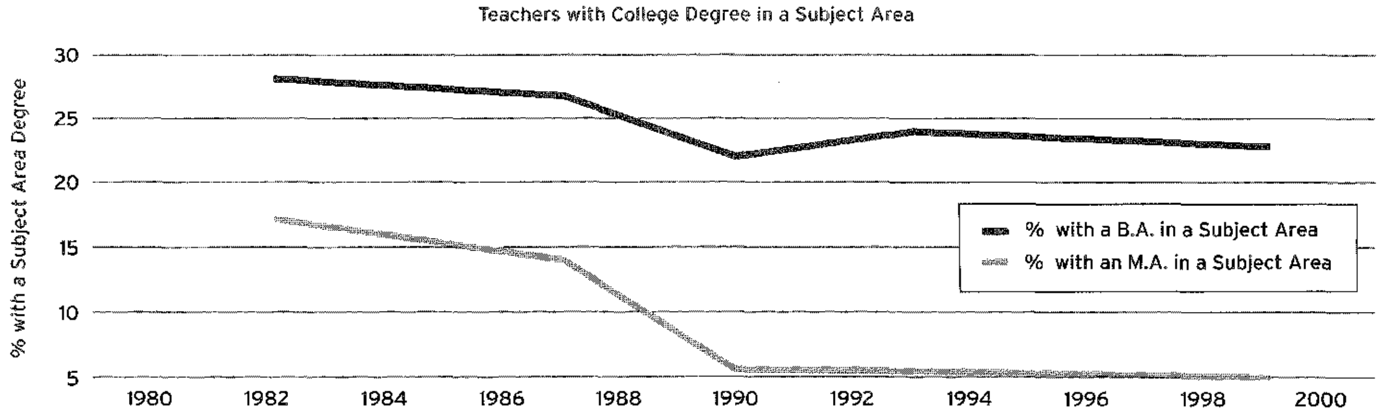
Parents and the media report a wild increase in homework during the past few years, but the data based on student responses show no increase and possibly a drop.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

The Unskilled Teacher (Figure 11)

A Nation at Risk *called for recruiting more teachers with degrees in subject areas rather than majors in education, but the education system has only grown less successful in attracting knowledgeable graduates.*



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

THE CHASM remains

MINORITY STUDENTS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY CONCENTRATED IN urban school districts. During the 1990–91 school year, 40 of the 57 districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools reported student populations in which minority students composed the majority. By the 1997–98 school year, the number had risen to 46 districts. Though there are 15,000 school districts in the United States, ten big districts educate 19 percent of all African-American children, and six educate 21 percent of all Hispanic students. Students in these urban districts are likely to be poor and to attend school with others who are poor. According to *Education Week*, 53 percent of students in urban districts attend high-poverty schools, compared with 22 percent of students in nonurban districts.

A Nation at Risk didn't have much to say to these school districts and their students. Its prescriptions made sense for students whose basic preparation for school was sound and for school systems that had the capacity to respond to pressure by offering more rigorous courses. But raised expectations alone are not a remedy for the problems of children who enter school unprepared to do the work that is normally expected. Similarly, requiring that schools teach more challenging materials is not sufficient for schools that cannot provide competent instruction. Nor is the prescription to raise standards for new teachers necessarily helpful to schools and districts that are the least attractive employers.

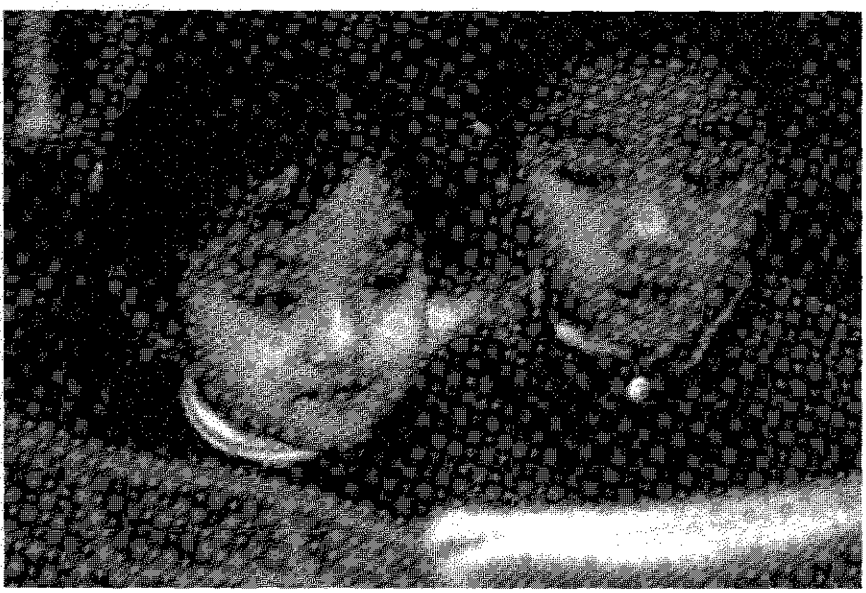
A Nation at Risk *failed to address the unique problems of urban schools and minority children, whose test scores continue to lag behind those of whites*

STILL AT RISK

The gaps between minority and white achievement are as wide now as at the time that *Risk* was released. Moreover, gaps in "authentic" indicators like rates of high-school completion and college entry continue to be very large.

by PAUL T. HILL, KACEY GUIN, AND MARY BETH CELIO

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW JUDD/MASTERFILE



Big-city superintendents consistently say that making schools effective for poor minority children will require reallocating money and personnel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WEI YAN/MASTERFILE

In 74 urban districts studied by *Education Week*—districts where many if not a majority of the students are minorities—less than 50 percent of the freshmen entering high school in 1990 graduated four years later. Post-*Risk* reforms were intended to decrease academic failure, but in situations where standards are raised but instruction is not improved, they might in fact increase the dropout rate. Russell Rumberger of the University of California, Santa Barbara, suggests that some high schools might "push out" students who are expected to get low test scores. Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago and Eric Camburn of the University of Michigan have also shown that students drop out due to their fear of not being able to complete all required credits. They suggest that large, impersonal high schools and poor elementary- and middle-school preparation lead to early failure in key courses and thence to dropping out.

Quelling Entrepreneurship

Clearly, in our existing public education system, raised expectations are not sufficient to drive universal improvement. High expectations are necessary, as long as they are a reflection of what children really need to know rather than a utopian vision of what every child in a perfect world would know. But they need to be coupled with fundamental changes in the education system, especially in large urban systems.

A common observation among social-service workers and heads of philanthropic foundations is that big-city public school systems are the toughest and least malleable bureaucracies they deal with. Moreover, public education has little capacity to invest in new ideas. The vast preponderance of money in K–12 schools goes for salaries. Certification rules and the provisions of union contracts control employment. Even when government increases education spending, unions make sure that most of it is used for salary increases. When there are new investments—like California's recent efforts to reduce class sizes—they are allocated via political entrepreneurship and bargaining, not according to what works.

These facts make it difficult for new ideas and new people to penetrate public education. Public schools allow small-scale innovation by individual teachers, but these innovations are usually limited to one classroom or school, leading to complaints among educators about the futility of "random acts of innovation." There is no mechanism for a promising idea to capture a wider market, nor is there any incentive for other teachers or schools to adopt a promising idea.

Being an unfriendly environment for entrepreneurship hurts urban school systems in two ways: 1) they are not oriented toward a continual search for better ways of serving students; and 2) they seldom can take full advantage of ideas and resources available in the broader society.

Big-city school systems are constrained by rules and the individual ownership of jobs. Districts can do anything that their funders and regulators (including courts with which they have consent decrees) will permit. In practice, the aggregate effect of these constraints is to make any action outside the status quo risky. Almost any reallocation of time, money, teachers, or students is likely to generate objections. Teacher union contracts in most cities also prevent schools from choosing teachers and assume that "fit" does not matter: teachers are interchangeable, and schools are created only by assembling standard parts. This attitude ignores the reality that schools with inferior or mismatched parts, such as less capable teachers, will likely produce inferior results.

Rules also limit the ability of public school systems to use civic resources in the schools. Our cities are treasure houses filled with human talent and great institutions—museums and universities, orchestras, religious institutions, and foundations, all of them dedicated to learning. But the way we now run public education has kept these institutions on the sidelines. They can give money and moral support, but they cannot create or operate public schools, nor can their musicians, scientists, writers, and artists teach students, except before and after school hours or as volunteers.

This combination of inflexibility and distance from the rest of society gives many cities a much weaker and less effective public education system than they could have. Even school superintendents, generally cast as defenders of the systems they run, are often candid about their school systems' inability to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children. In interviews, big-city superintendents consistently say that making schools effective for poor minority children will require reallocating money and personnel. They dream of creating all-literacy primary schools, offering reading-focused preschools to poor children only, establishing ungraded primary schools to eliminate the stigma for children of being held back, offering back-to-basics and charter schools, extending the school year for disadvantaged students, and even creating boarding schools for children in abusive or dangerous homes. Rather than relying on learning goals or professional development—stock solutions that do not perturb the current system—these superintendents talk tough about reading instruction, longer school days, and giving extra time to the kids at greatest risk. For them, control of money is the core issue. "You need to be able to change how every dollar is spent," said one. "You have to try to get hold of the central office. This requires getting hold of the money it now controls."

The Money Gap

The high negative correlation between poverty and student achievement is well known. What is less known is that the schools serving the poor often get less money, even within districts. In a path-breaking analysis of real-dollar funding levels in a sample of big-city districts, Marguerite Roza and Karen Hawley Miles found that per-pupil funding in schools can vary by as much as a factor of three, and that elementary schools in low-income areas receive from 10 to 30 percent less per pupil than higher-income schools in the same districts. These differences are offset slightly by funds from state and federal programs targeted to the poor, but these amounts at best equalize spending rather than, as advertised, supporting higher per-pupil spending for children who need the most help.

This is largely the result of low-income schools' having the least-experienced, and thus lowest-paid, teachers. Under union contracts, teachers with even one or two years' experience have some say over where they teach, and the vast majority of teachers with any choices avoid the most challenging schools. These schools, in turn, are forced to hire mainly younger and lower-paid teachers. As a result, there is significant variation in average teacher salaries within districts. As Roza has found in several large western school districts, schools in wealthier neighborhoods can receive more than 100 applications for a teacher vacancy, while schools in poor neighborhoods might receive only two or three. For schools serving the poorest children, this means three things: they have almost no choice of whom they employ; classes there are always taught by green teachers and those who have no alternative; and the academic year begins every fall with a new group of teachers who have never worked together.

The consequences for the education of the poorest children are dire. Their schools experience the highest rates of teacher turnover, ensuring that whatever teachers learn on the job will move elsewhere with them. Schools that consistently lose in the market for experienced teachers often have annual teacher turnover rates above 50 percent. Such schools are turbulent and difficult to lead. They are also impenetrable for parents, who cannot build stable and mutually confident working relationships with teachers and principals.

Schools and school districts need to become problem-solving organizations whose job it is to find the best possible way to educate the children entrusted to them. Schools need to have the entrepreneurial freedom to find the best combination of people and technologies for the children they serve. Parents and taxpayers also need to know exactly how individual schools and districts are performing, and they should have the power to move children from stagnant schools to better ones. Low-performing schools also need investments, so they can attract excellent people and replace ineffective methods with effective ones. Finally, teachers and administrators need to join other Americans in gaining benefits—pay and job security—from good performance and jeopardizing those benefits when they underperform.

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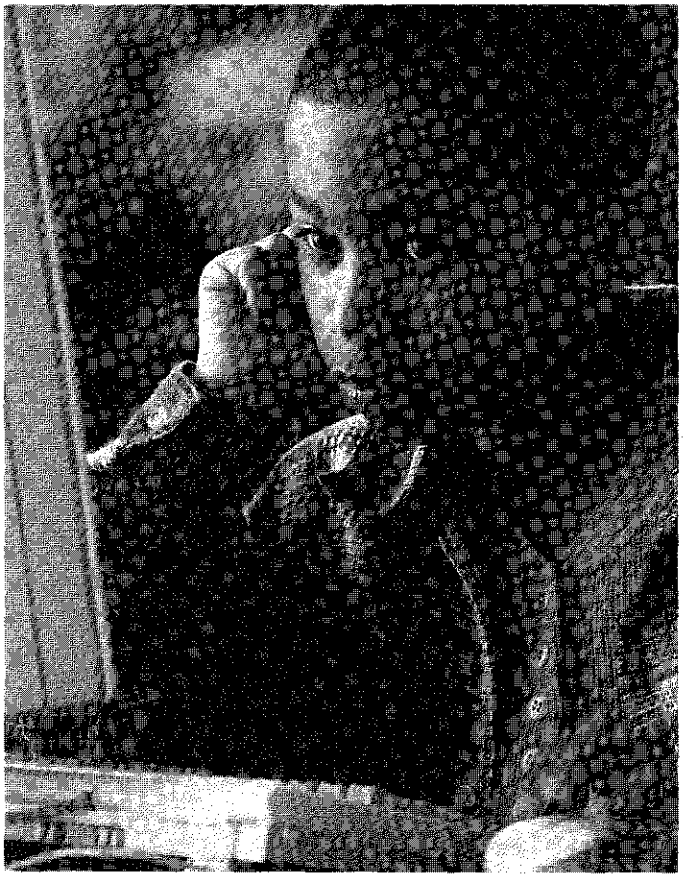


Innovations are usually limited to one classroom or school, leading to complaints about the futility of "random acts of innovation."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM CRAIGMYLE/MASTERFILE

ReFORm BLOCKers

The American political system advantages those who prefer the status quo, which is why so little has changed in American education

by TERRY M. MOE

STILL AT RISK

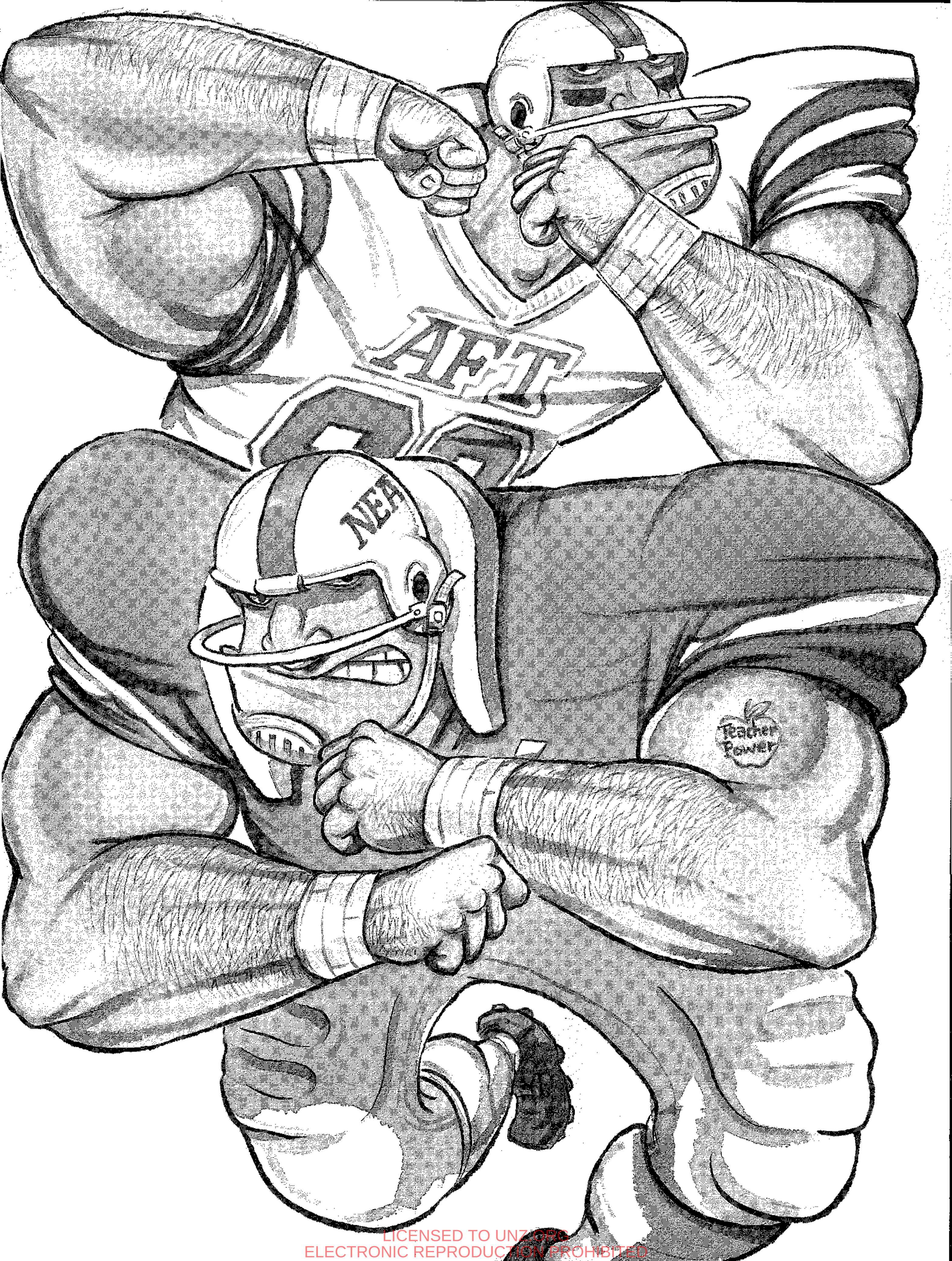
TWENTY YEARS AGO *A Nation at Risk* set off alarms about the quality of America's schools, and ever since our country has been caught up in a frenzy of education reform. But the frenzy hasn't produced much. After untold billions of dollars and lofty reform packages too numerous to list, very little has been accomplished.

Why such disappointing results? Many factors are no doubt responsible, but much of the answer rests with the politics of education. The problem is that, with rare exceptions, reforms that make it through the political process tend to be those that are acceptable to established interests and that leave the fundamentals—and problems—of the current system intact. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This status quo bias arises from three facts of political life. The first is that the teacher unions are far and away the most powerful actors in American education. Their tremendous financial resources allow them to influence campaigns at all levels of government, and their huge memberships—more than 3 million total, spread across virtually every electoral district in the country—enable them to turn out armies of activists in support of union-endorsed candidates. No other group can claim such an awesome capacity for in-the-trenches political action.

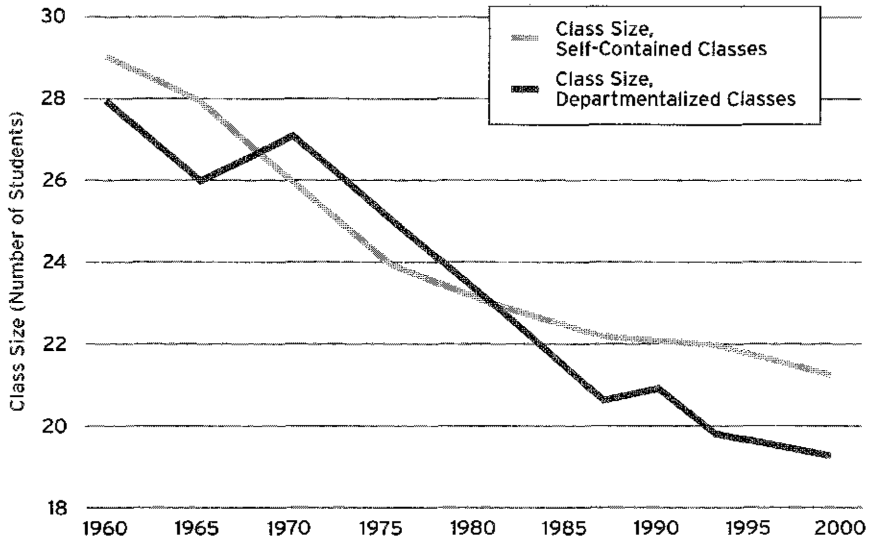
The second fact of life is that the teacher unions use their power to resist true reform. Their fundamental interests have to do with protecting and extending their collective bargaining arrangements, protecting members' jobs, enhancing members' pay and working conditions, defending members' rights in the workplace, and increasing the demand for teachers. These interests need have nothing to do with what is best for children, schools, or the public interest. They are classic

ILLUSTRATION BY TRAVIS FOSTER


AFT
NEA
Teacher Power

A Reform Even the Unions Like (Figure 1)

Class size has steadily decreased over the past four decades due to heavy support from the teacher unions.



Note: Class size numbers are based on teachers' reports. Departmentalized classes refer to classes where students change teachers for different subjects.

SOURCES: National Education Association & U.S. Department of Education. Figure created by Caroline M. Hoxby

vested interests—interests rooted in the existing structure of public education—and they are threatened by serious efforts to transform the system and to make it more productive.

The third fact of life is that American government is built around checks and balances that make new legislation difficult to pass and blocking it relatively easy. To be adopted, a reform must make it past subcommittees, full committees, and floor votes in two houses (not to mention filibusters, holds, and other obstacles), and the executive must sign it. This means that reformers must win political victories at *each* step to achieve their ends, while opponents need to succeed at only *one* step to block. By the design of our political system, then, the advantage always goes to interest groups that want to keep things the way they are. Which is precisely what the teacher unions want.

These are the elements that, taken together, generate a politics of the status quo. The teacher unions are extraordinarily powerful, they have a strong self-interest in resisting change, and they operate within a political structure that magnifies their power by making it easy for them to block change. This is why true reforms are either defeated or eviscerated, and why the reforms we get don't change things much.

Mainstream Reforms

In the wake of *Risk*, the driving force for change came from business groups and state governors. Business groups were deeply concerned about a faltering economy and the growing threat of international competition. They saw a mediocre education system as a big part of the problem—and they demanded action. Governors were the politicians who responded. They were held responsible, by both business and the public, for doing something to improve the schools, and their popularity and careers hung in the balance. Education reform became the politically smart thing to do.

But how to do it? Not experts themselves, governors and business leaders turned to experts within the education community, particularly academics from education schools—whose advice was predictably mainstream. The way to improve the schools, these experts argued, was to spend more money, raise teacher salaries, toughen graduation requirements, and strengthen teacher certification and training, among other things: reforms that could be pursued without changing the basic structure of the system. As a result, the tidal wave of reforms that swept across America involved almost nothing that was threatening to the teacher unions. Indeed, the unions had much to cheer about, because the reform movement gave them golden opportunities to press hard for what they wanted anyway—more spending—and to claim that they too were dedicated reformers.

With mainstream reforms doing little to change the system, real reformers generally agreed by the late 1980s that their efforts were not working. The notion spread that incremental changes were inadequate for dealing with the system's deeper problems, that significant improvement called for a restructuring of the system itself.

This shift in perspective led to a surge of support for two major movements that soon took on lives of their own: the choice movement and the accountability movement. In other respects, however, the newfound concern for restructuring didn't amount to much. Intellectually it served as little more than a big tent under which a hodgepodge of ideas—from decentralization to professional development to the teaching of higher-order thinking—could be packaged as exciting, break-the-mold reforms. Which they weren't. There was no grand vision of how the system should be changed, no agreement whatsoever on what it might mean to restructure.

This tradition of reform-as-tinkering has been maintained to the present day, with all the familiar proposals—augmented by a new favorite, reductions in class size—continuing to occupy much of the reformist agenda. Why are the states investing so heavily in reforms that hold so little promise? The answer is that, despite their ineffectiveness, they are political winners. They are popular with the public; the

> "In the American political system, the advantage always goes to interest groups that want to keep things the way they are. Which is precisely what the teacher unions want."

education school experts make "scientific" claims on their behalf; the business community tends to believe these claims; and the teacher unions either support them or find them innocuous—and so don't exercise their blocking power. From a political standpoint, mainstream reforms are all pluses and no minuses.

The Accountability Movement

The greatest achievement of *Risk* is not that it generated countless education reforms. Most of them have been a waste of time and money. Its greatest achievement is that it directed attention to the problems of public education, brought political power to bear on the side of reform, and gave impetus to the movements for accountability and choice—both of which, while fighting against long political odds, have the capacity to transform American education for the better.

As the 1980s drew to a close, what made accountability so attractive was that, unlike mainstream reforms, it offered a coherent way of thinking about the problems plaguing the system and a plan for righting them. Moreover, because it was a top-down approach—a demand for effective management that business leaders, governors, and the public could readily understand—it came across as a natural extension of mainstream reform efforts to make the existing system work better. It was a reform that everyone could agree was desirable.

Well, almost everyone. The teacher unions and their education allies had a very different view. For the goal of the movement was to hold *them* (or their members) accountable, and that was something the unions wanted to avoid. Historically, teachers and administrators have been granted substantial autonomy, and their pay and jobs have been almost totally secure, regardless of their performance. A very cushy arrangement. So why would they want to have specific goals thrust upon them, their performance evaluated in a serious manner, their pay linked to performance, and their jobs made less secure? They wouldn't. In their view, the absence of accountability was a terrific deal, and they wanted to keep the deal they had.

With accountability so popular, however, the unions and their allies found themselves in a political bind. Full-fledged opposition would have put them on the wrong side and pegged them as self-interested defenders of the status quo. This being so, they opted for a more sophisticated course of action: to "support" accountability, participate in its design—and block any components they found threatening.

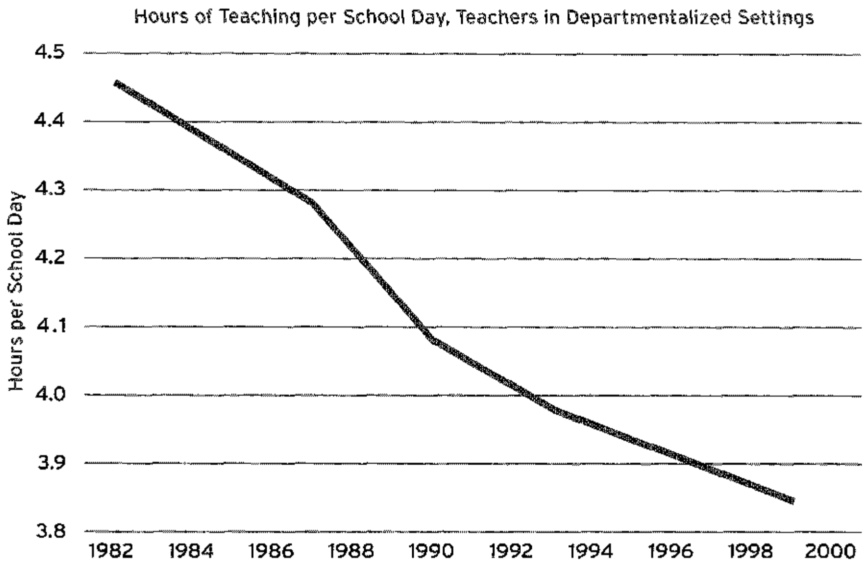
From the unions' standpoint, most aspects of the typical accountability plan can be "supported" at little cost. After all, there is nothing about curriculum standards that is inherently threatening to union interests. The same can be said for tests of student achievement. True, standards that are truly rigorous can set teachers up for criticism (when students fail to meet them), and achievement tests can provide a devastatingly precise means of conveying the bad news. But this is why unions participate in the design process: to ensure that only "appropriate" standards and tests actually get adopted.

Standards and tests become truly threatening only when they are backed by formal consequences. The unions' prime goal is to see that this doesn't happen. Their highest priority is to ensure that there are no sanctions for poor performance, and above all that there is no weeding-out process by which the school system rids itself of mediocre or incompetent teachers. No one should ever lose a job. Other kinds of economic sanctions—pay cuts, school closings—are forbidden as well.

Another union bugaboo is pay for performance, which in a genuine system of accountability would typically be the key means of rewarding productive behavior, discouraging unproductive behavior, and introducing proper incentives. The unions insist that pay be determined by formal criteria—seniority, education—that are not measures (or causes) of how much students learn and that any teacher can satisfy. Bad teachers and good teachers get paid the same. No one has an economic incentive to perform.

When consequences are actually adopted (against their wishes), the unions do everything they can to ensure that they take the form of positive inducements—and thus more money in the hands of teachers and schools. There should be only winners. No losers. If performance is to be rewarded, the unions insist that the rewards go to whole schools rather than individual teachers—which dilutes the impact on teacher incentives, but induces less competition among union members. Even for low-performing schools, moreover, the unions insist that the consequences be positive: more money, more training, more programs—things that the unions would be pressuring for anyway and that do nothing to promote the right incentives.

Because of union power, then, the politics of education



Another Reform the Unions Like (Figure 2)

Today's teachers spend even less time in front of the classroom than teachers did when A Nation at Risk *was released.*

Note: Departmentalized settings are where students change teachers for different subjects.

SOURCES: National Education Association & U.S. Department of Education. Figure created by Caroline M. Hoxby

tends to produce accountability systems in which the requirements of effective management are thoroughly violated. The typical system includes no mechanisms to weed out poor teachers, no attempts to pay teachers based on their performance, no real sanctions for low performance, and no logical connection between rewards and incentives.

The truth is, today's accountability systems are pale reflections of the real thing. They look like accountability systems. And they are called accountability systems. But they can't do their jobs very well, because they literally aren't designed to.

School Choice

School choice has provoked more political conflict than any other education reform because it is the most threatening to established interests, especially union interests. And the unions, by no coincidence, are vehement in their opposition.

Accountability, at least, leaves the traditional top-down system intact. But choice unleashes new forces that work from the bottom up to redistribute power, to give schools and teachers strong incentives to perform, and to hold them accountable—through consequences that are automatically invoked (the loss of kids and resources)—if they don't do a good job. It also directly threatens the unions with a loss of members and resources, with far greater difficulties in organizing new schools, and with losses in power, control, and perquisites.

When it comes to vouchers, the strongest form of choice, the unions have drawn a line in the sand and used every ounce of their power to block. With great success. But while this has had a huge impact on the progress of education reform, the unions' success has not been total. The chink in their armor is that the voucher movement has come to focus its attention on disadvantaged children, particularly in failing inner-city schools, and polls show that poor and minority families are now the most enthusiastic supporters of choice in the country. This has expanded both the constituency and the intellectual and moral arguments for vouchers, put the unions and their allies (including the Democrats) in the awkward position of opposing the poor in fierce political battles—and led to major voucher victories in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida (not to mention the Supreme Court). It has also led to the proliferation of privately funded voucher programs, which the unions have been powerless to stop, and which now enroll some 100,000 disadvantaged kids nationwide.

Choice advocates have also fought hard for two other kinds of market-based reforms: charters and privatization. From the unions' standpoint, charters are hardly desirable. If seriously pursued, they create competition, allow teachers and students to move from unionized to nonunion public schools, and reduce union power and control. Still, because the money and the kids remain in the public sector, charters are not nearly the threat that vouchers are—and the unions have tried to salvage their public image, as well as give their Democratic allies much-needed wiggle room on the choice issue, by following a more accommodationist strategy.

But how to "support" charters without harming union interests? As with accountability, the unions have solved this problem through the politics of program design, using their power to insist on strict limits on the number of new charters, to require that charters be authorized by local school districts (which have incentives to say no), to require that charters be covered by union contracts, to subject them to as many rules and regulations as possible, and so on. While charters have become the consensus approach to school choice in American education, the fact is that today's charter systems offer very little choice or competition—which is just the way the unions want it.

Privatization is another target of union power. For reformers, the idea is that school districts or chartering agencies should be able to contract with private firms to operate public schools—especially failing ones—in order to take advantage of the greater flexibility, expertise, efficiency, and inno-

> “The dire condition of disadvantaged kids in failing urban schools will prompt more and more liberals to embrace school choice, leaving the teacher unions to fight their battles alone.”

vation that the marketplace might offer. But here again the unions are threatened. They have virtually no control over the actions and operations of private firms. The firms' practices and procedures—longer hours, different teaching methods, different curricula—may force changes that the unions and their members don't want. And most important, small experiments with private firms could lead to far greater privatization in the future and to a flow of jobs and money to the private sector.

With the unions and their allies thus opposed, privatization has been blocked in all but a small percentage of school districts, succeeding only when the schools in question are consistently horrible and the districts desperate. In these cases, the unions have often licked their wounds and kept on fighting: making loud public claims about the firms' poor performance, inciting parent opposition, accusing firms of doctoring test scores, pursuing court cases to challenge the firms' authority and decisions, and otherwise making privatization a miserable, costly, and politically tumultuous experience for all concerned. When they can't block privatization, they do everything they can to see that it fails in practice.

Despite the suffocating effects of union power, market-based reforms have clearly made progress. Choice, competition, and privatization are taken seriously in today's policy arenas, there is real power behind them, and they have clearly established a beachhead in American education. As with accountability, however, there is more symbol than substance here. For even when these reforms have “won,” the unions have succeeded in imposing all manner of restrictions and limitations to ensure that there is actually little choice, little competition, little reliance on market dynamics—and little threat to their interests. What appear to be revolutionary reforms are mostly gutted by the time they make it through the political process.

The Future

So are the aspirations of *Risk* doomed to go unmet? The answer depends on whether the teacher unions can be dislodged as the supreme gatekeepers of education reform and their blocking power drastically reduced. Obviously, there can be nothing easy about this. The unions are already powerful, and they will use that power to try to defeat any attempt to take away their power.

Nonetheless, there is a power transition under way even now. It is almost imperceptible, but it is happening. The main sources are the very reforms that the unions have been fighting against for the past two decades: school choice and school accountability. These reforms have gained a foothold in American education despite union opposition, and, as they expand their turf in the years ahead, they will eat away at the foundations of union power.

This is especially true for school choice. Over the long haul, the dire condition of disadvantaged kids in failing urban schools will prompt more and more of today's liberal opponents of choice—notably the civil-rights groups and many urban Democrats—to begin representing their own constituents on this issue, leaving the teacher unions to fight their battles alone. Thus isolated, the unions will lose more of their battles, and choice will continue to expand, if slowly and episodically. As it does, it will have an increasingly corrosive effect on union power. By allowing kids to leave regular public schools for alternatives and by forcing unionized schools to compete with nonunion schools, choice ensures that the unions will lose members and resources—and thus become smaller and less politically powerful. As this happens, they will be less able to defend the status quo against the relentless challenges of reformers, and there will be more and increasingly stronger reforms—which will undermine their power still further, thus accelerating reforms. And so it will go.

This process may take decades, and no system emerging from politics is likely to meet our highest expectations. But it stands to be a significant improvement over the system we have now, combining top-down accountability with the energizing, bottom-up forces of choice and competition to put a premium on performance and to drive out much of the complacency that has for so long been the norm in American education. This, I think, will be the true legacy of *Risk*. Not the tidal wave of mainstream reforms usually associated with it, but the far more important achievements of accountability and choice—in changing American education for the better, and in moving us beyond the politics of the status quo.

–Terry M. Moe is a professor of political science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.

HIGH Hurdle

by CHESTER E. FINN JR.

STILL AT RISK

THE AUTHORS OF *A Nation at Risk* recognized a fundamental truth of education: that reforms, if they are to be successful, must reach into education's inner sanctum, the classroom. As a result, changing the ways in which teachers are recruited, trained, and paid was one of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's chief priorities.

If the commission's recommendations in this area had one animating theme, it was the need to attract a more talented pool of individuals to teaching. It was believed that the field's low salaries and prestige were repelling high-caliber college graduates (see Figure 1). Moreover, the training programs run by education schools were heavy on pedagogy and light on content, creating a situation in which half the newly employed teachers of core subjects were "not qualified" to teach them, in the commission's view. The worst shortages were in mathematics and science, where even mediocre graduates could find jobs that paid reasonably well outside education (see Figure 2).

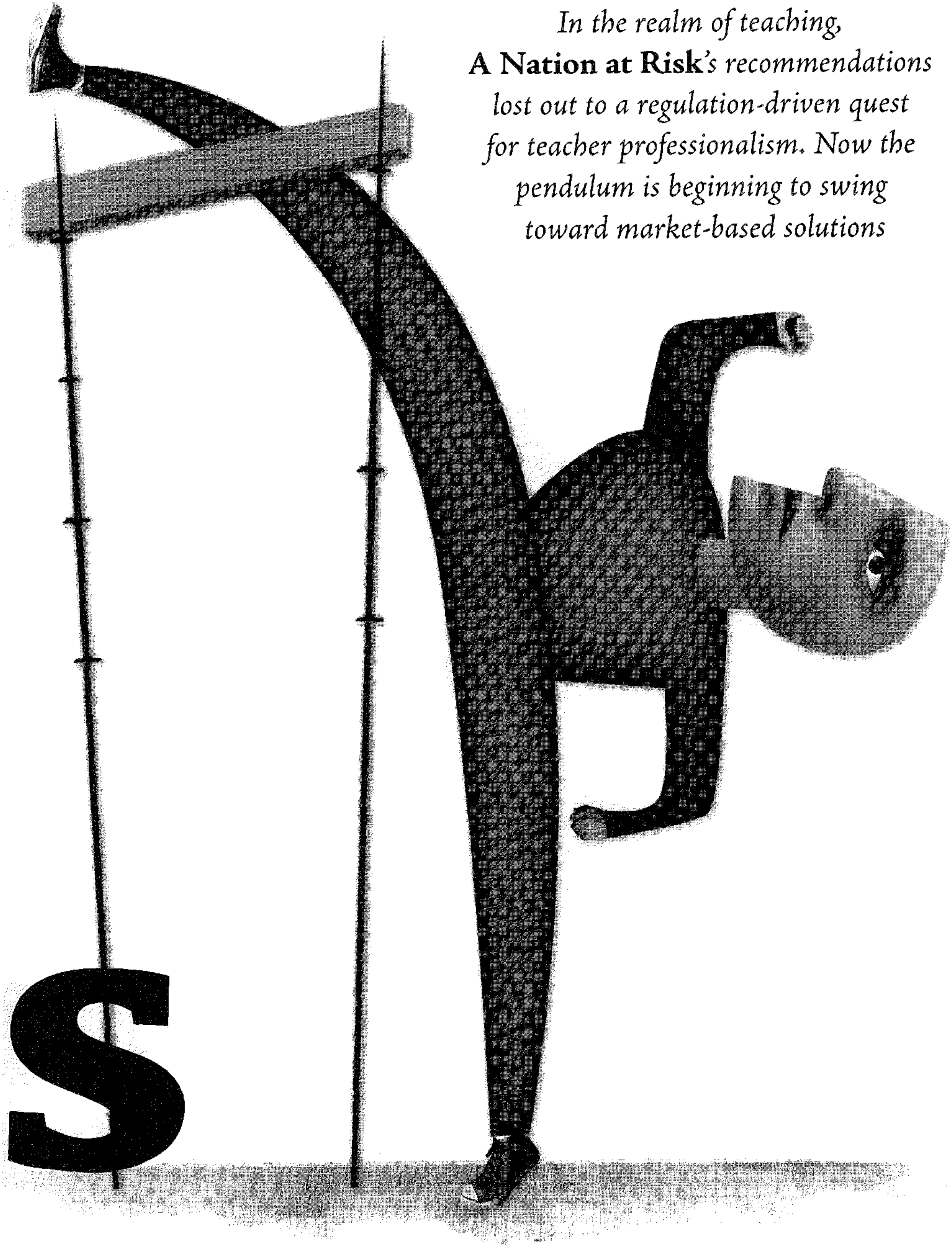
To solve these problems, the commission recommended that potential teachers be required to demonstrate both competence in an academic discipline and an aptitude for teaching. Incentives were needed to attract outstanding students to teaching, and the commission argued that new, unconventional paths to the profession should be opened. The commission recommended increasing salaries to the levels necessary to recruit stronger candidates, adding that salaries should be performance-based and sensitive to market conditions (additional pay for math and science teachers, for instance). Performance-based pay would be tied to an "effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated." Teaching would gain some of the accoutrements of a profession, such as career ladders that enable teachers to gain in status and pay without leaving the classroom; master teachers would design training programs and supervise novices. The object was to create a corps of knowledgeable, skilled teachers who would be evaluated, paid, and promoted based on their performance. In other words, the commission wanted to treat teaching like a true profession.

A Rival Is Born

Though the commission's view of teachers and teaching has gained in popularity in recent years—witness Secretary of Education Rod Paige's recent call to dismantle the

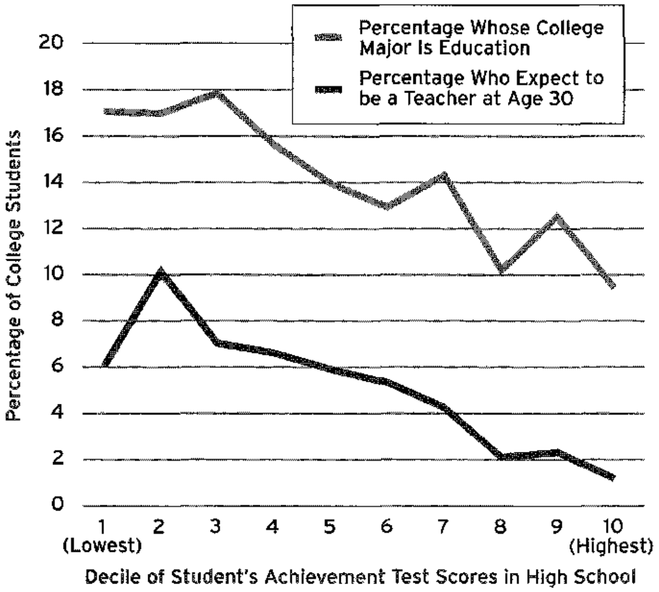
ILLUSTRATION BY JOYCE HESSELBERTH

In the realm of teaching,
A Nation at Risk'*s recommendations*
lost out to a regulation-driven quest
for teacher professionalism. Now the
pendulum is beginning to swing
toward market-based solutions



Bottom of the Barrel (Figure 1)

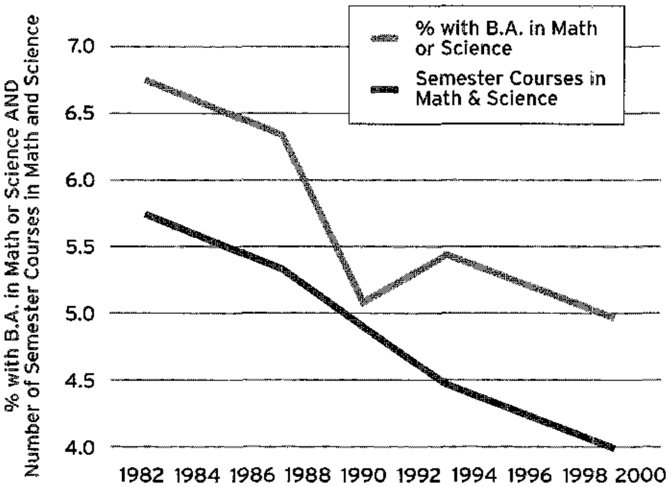
One of A Nation at Risk*'s chief priorities was to upgrade the nation's corps of teachers. Two decades later, it seems that new teachers are still drawn disproportionately from the bottom third of American college-going students.*



SOURCE: U. S. Department of Education, 2002. Responses from students who enrolled in college before late spring 1994. Figure created by Caroline M. Hoxby

Unskilled Labor (Figure 2)

During a period when the qualifications of teachers were a special concern, the share of teachers who have a degree (either a baccalaureate or a master's) in math or science actually fell, from nearly 7 percent to 5 percent between 1982 and 1999. In 1982, the average teacher had taken almost six semesters of math and science in college. By 1999, the average teacher had taken only four semesters.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education. Figure created by Caroline M. Hoxby

current system of training and certification—few of its recommendations have been widely embraced. We've really just toyed with some of them. For example, prodded by Governor Lamar Alexander, Tennessee established a teacher "career ladder," but once Alexander left the statehouse Tennessee's teacher unions gnawed at the career ladder until it collapsed. The "performance-based" pay experiments in places like Denver, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Douglas County, Colorado, turn out to be linked primarily to supervisor or peer judgments, not to a teacher's track record in improving student learning. Most states have developed alternative routes to certification, meant to ease the entry of nontraditional candidates and career switchers into public school classrooms. But many of these programs have slid back into the clutches of the education schools, with the result that candidates end up having to take and do essentially all the same things as "traditional" candidates in order to become certified.

Why hasn't more serious reform occurred in this area? One explanation is surely the intense resistance to many of these changes from powerful groups and institutions within the teaching profession's firmament. Doing what the commission urged with respect to teachers would have meant altering deeply entrenched practices and challenging the sturdiest bastions of the education establishment: teacher unions, colleges of education, and state education bureaucracies. The forces arrayed on behalf of such changes were not half as strong as those massed to repel reform.

Meanwhile, and perhaps more important, the forces of resistance also developed an alternative view of teachers and teaching that has gained heavy traction in the past two decades. It is known widely as the "teacher professionalism" agenda, but it in fact substitutes the façades of professionalism—the lengthy training, peer-controlled licensing boards, and certificates of advanced proficiency—for the hallmarks of a true profession, whose members possess specialized skills and knowledge and whose employment and compensation are based on reputation and performance. Teacher professionalism begins to look more like a teacher cartel when it is operating in the context of a government-run system instead of a market-based economy—where professionals must constantly prove themselves in the competitive arena.

The professionalization movement among teachers can be traced mainly to another prominent report of the 1980s. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* was issued in 1986 by the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. Its most notable feature was a subtle yet profound change of focus: from teachers-as-instruments-of-school-improvement to teachers-as-shapers-of-school-improvement. From teachers as "means" to teachers as "ends." One might say from "teachers as workers" to "teachers as bosses."

Carnegie's view of teaching and teachers could coexist with one or two of the Excellence Commission's teacher recommendations, but on the whole it was rooted in dramatically different core beliefs about who should make key education decisions, and it advanced a markedly different view of the organizational and policy framework within which teachers work—or should work.

This altered focus had much to do with who was focusing. The Excellence Commission included educators, but could in no way be termed a creature of the teaching profession or public school establishment. By contrast, the Carnegie task force included a generous representation of public education's political establishment: the presidents of both national teacher unions (the National Education Association's Mary Hatwood

Futrell and the American Federation of Teachers' Albert Shanker), two state education superintendents (California's Bill Honig and Minnesota's Ruth Randall), an ed school dean, the *New York Times*'s lead education columnist (Fred Hechinger), and the ubiquitous John W. Gardner.

The two panels began with divergent notions of the key education problems needing to be solved. The Excellence Commission took as its solitary challenge the weak performance of U.S. schools. The Carnegie task force acknowledged the need for stronger student performance but added a second, equivalent challenge: "Creating . . . a profession of well-educated teachers prepared to assume new powers and responsibilities to redesign schools for the future." Carnegie's authors yearned to shift power from "those who would improve the schools from the outside" to educators themselves. The Carnegie group was bent on empowering teachers, boosting their status, influence, and control over the primary-secondary education field in general and schools in particular—and did so with serene confidence that doing this would also boost pupil performance.

Unlike the Excellence Commission, the Carnegie task force had powerful allies, including people and organizations with great staying power, notably the teacher unions themselves. The campaign that it launched also had access to ample private and public dollars. Much of this money came from Carnegie and other wealthy foundations such as Rockefeller—as became even clearer in 1994, when those two foundations teamed up to provide funds for the new (and seemingly permanent) National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), also drawn from the heart of public education's political establishment.

In time, the teacher-empowerment campaign also won federal funding—far more, ironically, than anything done about teaching in the name of the federally chartered Excellence Commission—and gained much sway in Washington and in state capitals. While it would oversimplify to ascribe this to partisanship, it cannot have hurt those advancing the Carnegie agenda that, for eight crucial years during this period, the federal executive branch was home to the Clinton administration, which was politically in sync with the teacher unions and philosophically comfortable with the "professionalism agenda." (GOP policymakers are more apt to think of teaching as a problem area that needs to be set right, even when this entails changes that the unions don't like.) In the end, though, the main explanation for teacher professionalism's leverage at the federal and state levels was the old-fashioned, many-splendored political clout of its architects.

The Rival Prospers

Between 1986, when *A Nation Prepared* was issued, and 1994, when NCTAF was formed, several related entities were born or strengthened in pursuit of the professionalism goal. Foremost among these was the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), founded in 1987 and the recipient of much foundation and federal largesse, chiefly orchestrated by North Carolina's former governor, Jim Hunt, who had helped to draft *A Nation Prepared*. NBPTS offers an advanced credential to teachers whom it identifies largely through a peer-review process. In other words, it recognizes teachers whose ideas and practices find favor with other educators. (There is, as yet, no proof that their students learn more than those of other teachers.)

Also launched in 1987 was the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), a group of state education departments, universities, and national education groups that seeks to reform teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development.

Another key player is the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), long a sleepy "voluntary" accrediting body whose transformation began in 1991, when Arthur E. Wise took its helm. A tireless, smart, and politically sophisticated veteran of both academe and Washington, Wise dedicated himself to advancing the professionalism agenda, particularly by persuading many states that they should view NCATE as a partner in deciding which teacher-preparation programs deserve state approval. (This effort got a further boost in 1992 when the National Education Association committed itself to requiring all teacher-preparation programs to obtain NCATE certification.)

So while the Excellence Commission had no organizational progeny to carry on its bloodline, the Carnegie task force sired a whole family of descendants, including NBPTS, INTASC, NCTAF, and a reenergized NCATE. All these efforts gained further clout (and access to human, fiscal, and political resources) from their close affiliation with the teacher unions, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and other mainstream groups composing what former education secretary William J. Bennett once termed "the blob." And they benefited hugely from the emergence of a loose, interlocking directorate among them: many of the same organizations and people are engaged in the policy direction and political advancement (and funding) of them all.

Others joined the crusade for teacher professionalism. For example, in 1986, a cadre of prominent ed school deans formed a body called the "Holmes Group" to rethink teacher education. Its debut report, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, emphasized new and ostensibly more professional ways to prepare teachers. The report's conclusions were embellished four years later in *Tomorrow's Schools*, which was replete with talk of radically restructuring schools and creating "learning communities" and "professional development schools," ensuring that learning would become lifelong for both teachers and students. Like the Carnegie report and its offspring, the Holmes reports placed teachers at the center of the education solar system, not as a satellite orbiting within that system.

The "teacher professionalism" agenda substitutes the facades of professionalism—the lengthy training, peer-controlled licensing boards, and certificates of advanced proficiency—for the hallmarks of a true profession.

The Rival Prevails

Teacher professionalism has a mom-and-apple-pie aura. Americans are fond of their teachers and tend to respect people described as "professionals." As a result, the quest for teacher professionalism has largely trumped the push for improved teacher performance. It has become a policy goal in its own right. And it's become a goal on which much policy activity has centered. Indeed, the teacher professionalism agenda has had enormous influence over the policies and practices of American public education during the past decade and a half, dwarfing any impacts attributable to the Excellence Commission in terms both of scale and durability.

By 2001, for instance, 16 states had created "teacher professional standards boards" that were entirely autonomous of the state education agency and thus largely beyond the influence of elected policymakers. Such bodies wield immense power through their control of teacher (and principal) preparation standards and certification decisions. Three other states had semiautonomous boards of this kind, and a number of legislatures are considering moves in this direction. Seductive and reasonable as it sounds to wrest teacher standards and licensure from the bureaucratic grip of the state—after all, lawyers do much the same thing through the bar association—in reality these structures nearly always turn out to be dominated by teacher unionists and ed school faculty. This tends to lock in the professionalism agenda while rendering states markedly less hospitable to alternative certification, subject-centered preparation programs, and kindred reforms of teaching.

Likewise, nearly every state now has some sort of "partnership" with NCATE, the accrediting organization. In half the states, NCATE wields joint power in determining which preparation programs get state approval for purposes of teacher certification. In 18 others, NCATE advises the state education agency on which programs to approve. Four states require full NCATE accreditation before a teacher-training program can operate within their borders. Three more have imposed this requirement on their public colleges and universities. The upshot is that NCATE's ideas of what composes a sound program have immense influence on state decisions about who will teach in the public schools and how they will be prepared for the classroom.

Many states and school districts have also been persuaded to reward, recognize, or assist those teachers who secure a stamp of approval from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Half the states now offer continuing (or multiyear) salary increases to NBPTS-certified teachers. Four provide one-time bonuses, and 20 more offer other recognition or subsidies (such as paying NBPTS's hefty application fee for candidates from their states). Moreover, several hundred school districts have their own versions of salary boosts, bonuses, subsidies, and recognition for NBPTS-certified teachers.

In the end, the teacher professionalism agenda has functioned like a black hole, sucking in much of the available energy, attention, and funds and leaving little for other reforms—not just other teacher-related reforms (such as those urged by the Excellence Commission), but also a very different list of changes (technology, choice programs, preschool, new curricula) that might prove more effective and economical as strategies for boosting pupil achievement. We can conclude that along with salary increases and class size reductions, the reforms associated with teacher professionalism have been the principal policy preoccupation of educators themselves during the period since *A Nation at Risk.*

Countervailing Forces

The basic problem with the teacher professionalism agenda, as currently constructed, is that it rests on a shaky evidentiary and research base concerning its ability to boost student learning or to address either the quality or quantity challenges of the current teaching force. In other words, it is a weak (but costly) solution to the problems at hand. This is in part a result of its sheer conservatism. The professionalization agenda seeks to strengthen monopolies, to retain power and prestige within a tight fraternity of experts, to fend off structural changes, and, of course, to deter radical education innovations that do not hinge on a vast cadre of "professional" teachers (such as distance learning and "virtual" schooling).

One obstacle for the professionalizers is that many of their proposed changes end up worsening other education problems. For instance, the push to "raise standards" for entry into the public school classroom aggravates teacher shortages while boosting opportunity costs for career switchers and others who would be willing to try teaching. Bona-fide supply and demand considerations have made it impossible for states, districts, and schools to meet their teaching needs exclusively through mechanisms favored by the professionalizers. So they have made pragmatic exceptions to those mechanisms in recruiting, compensating, and licensing teachers. In the process they have often found that the exceptions work at least as well as the rule. Such is the case with programs like Teach for America and Troops to Teachers. The upshot is, as policymakers and citizens alike have observed, that good results can be obtained without jumping through all of the hoops of professionalization.

Another obstacle is the staying power of standards-based reform, which has placed greater pressure on teachers and other educators to demonstrate their effectiveness. The advent of more student testing, especially the spread of value-added measures of pupil and school performance, has given us both the technical ability to evaluate teachers by the results they produce and the moral imperative to do so.

The growth of the education marketplace has also undermined the professionalization agenda. The bottom-up, deregulatory, consumer-driven nature of the "choice movement" inevitably weakens the government-centered, regulation-based, educators-in-charge strategy of the professionalism agenda. Many schools of choice—charters, private schools, "outsourced" schools, and certainly home schools—are even exempt from state teacher-licensure requirements. That's a grave blow to Carnegie-style professionalism—and becomes more damaging as evidence emerges that such schools perform just as well as, and possibly better than, traditional public schools with all their certified teachers and principals.

The professionalization agenda has been stymied not only by broader trends but also by forces within union ranks.

For the most part, the unions remain stuck in an industrial model, consisting of job actions, district-wide collective bargaining, the defense of mediocrity, and insistence on uniform treatment for all their members. While there have been a handful of exceptions, the unions' general aversion to actually behaving—and encouraging their members to behave—like professionals is squarely at odds with the professionalism agenda itself. Indeed, as recently as July 2002, outgoing NEA president Bob Chase pleaded with his members not to "go backwards" on the "new unionism" agenda that he had sought (with very limited success) to advance during his tenure.

An Alternative Arises

Along with these trends, all of which tend to spoil the professionalizers' agenda, has come an alternative theory that has begun to win adherents, one that says the strategy favored by the professionalizers is wrong—or, at least, that it hasn't proved right and therefore should not be mandated throughout the land.

The alternative theory favors deregulation of many aspects of teaching, freer entry into public school classrooms, greater flexibility in personnel management, and more alternatives. Among the groups espousing this heterodox view are the National Council on Teacher Quality, the Education Leaders Council, the Progressive Policy Institute, and the Baltimore-based Abell Foundation. In a June 2002 report mentioned earlier, Secretary Paige alarmed NCTAF, NCATE, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and others habituated to federal backing for the professionalism agenda with his call to raise the bar on teacher academic standards while lowering barriers to classroom entry by people without conventional pedagogical preparation. Paige particularly deplores "mandated education courses, unpaid student teaching, and the hoops and hurdles of the state certification bureaucracy."

Regardless, the truth is that neither approach has proven itself so effective that it should be imposed across a large and varied nation. Political prudence and intellectual honesty argue for experimenting with both approaches and with some aspects and combinations of both.

Among the strategies worth trying are some that flow from the teacher-professionalism agenda: place teachers in charge of schools, employ and compensate them on terms that they like, and let them decide who is "qualified" to teach in those schools. Encourage the teacher-professionalism organizations (and the unions) to run schools of their own—an opportunity made readily available by the spread of the charter-school movement.

Other strategies worth trying fly in the face of the professionalism agenda. For instance, let charter schools experiment with alternative approaches to personnel. Let some districts and states experiment by field-testing performance-based pay, keyed to the academic value that teachers add to their pupils. Let distance-learning ventures get properly tested despite their profound implications for the role of teachers. Evaluate them, too.

Dual approaches should also be tested in the realm of teacher preparation. Let some teachers be trained by NCATE-accredited programs and reviewed by NBPTS. Let others enter the classroom through alternative routes and programs such as Teach for America. Evaluate both. Let us also try some promising hybrids, such as the Teacher Advancement Program, developed by the Milken Family Foundation, which enhances teacher professionalism in ways that also recall a number of the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* and the latter-day "alternative view" of teacher quality reform.

This list could easily be extended, but the point is clear. Too many of today's education reform debates are conducted as if they were winner-take-all contests that must leave a single reform strategy standing. That would make sense only if we were certain that a single strategy would succeed everywhere. But we're not. So let's try multiple approaches. Let's try them with proper control or comparison groups, and let's make sure they are evaluated according to the best available methods—and chiefly in relation to their impact on student achievement. To make that possible, let us declare a truce in the "teacher wars" for a decade or so, while we try to figure out what works best. Perhaps it will turn out that many different approaches are effective. Perhaps none will work well enough. But we'll be better off if we take seriously the job of trying to learn this from the children's standpoint instead of fussing endlessly over the allocation of adult interests.

–Chester E. Finn Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and senior editor of Education Next.

STILL AT RISK

Not So Grand a

A Nation at Risk *emphasized the importance of learning so-called "higher-order skills" in the early grades.* ***But even chess grand masters need to learn the basics first***

by

E. D. HIRSCH JR.

A Nation at Risk was mainly concerned with the high-school years. It wasn't until the report's last pages that it finally alluded to education in the early grades:

> *The curriculum in the crucial eight grades leading to the high-school years should be specifically designed to provide a sound base for study in those and later years in such areas as English language development and writing, computational and problem-solving skills, science, social studies, foreign language, and the arts. These years should foster an enthusiasm for learning and the development of the individual's gifts and talents.*

Throughout *Risk*, the authors expressed the concern that higher skills like comprehension and problem solving were being neglected in favor of mere basic skills such as number facts, phonics, and spelling. The path to education improvement was seen to lie not in the substance of what was taught in the first eight grades, but in the higher order proficiencies that were systematically inculcated. This emphasis on early-language and "problem-solving" skills rather than on early content was a fundamental mistake.

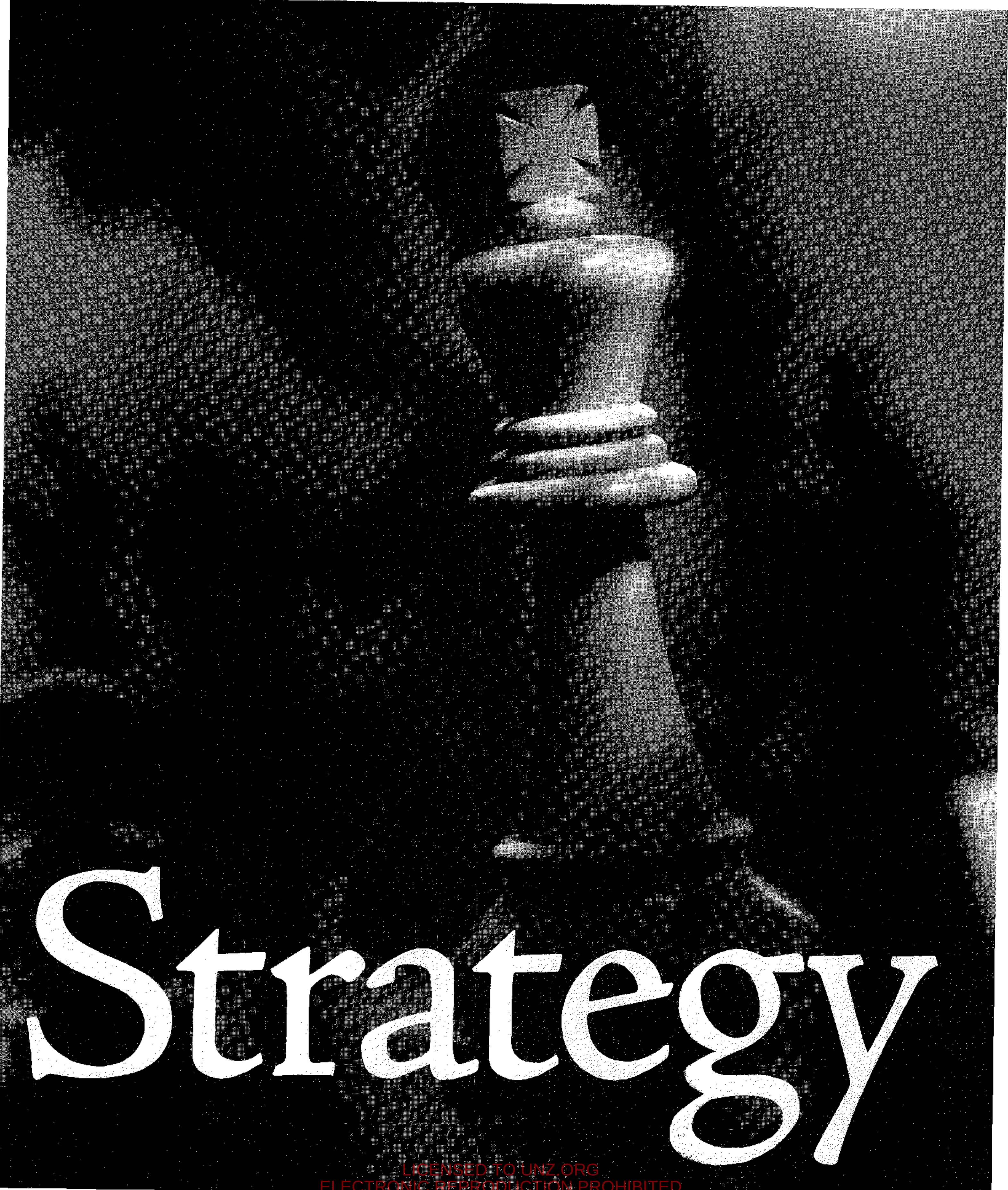
It was natural for the writers of *Risk* to seek reform where the most obvious declines had appeared. But it seems probable that the watering down of high school was less a cause of its lower scores than a consequence of a gradual decline of learning in the early grades. *Risk's* attitude toward the early grades reminds me of the comment many years ago of a repairman who came to fix a leak in our washing machine. He asked my wife where the leak was, and she replied, "At the bottom." He looked at her knowingly and said, "Yeah, that's what they all say." The authors of *Risk* saw declines at the high-school level, so they focused attention there when the problems began elsewhere.

Research has shown that a student's reading competence in 1st grade predicts his achievement in 11th grade. Fortunately, reformers and legislators have recently begun to emphasize early literacy—a promising advance in thinking and policy. But this welcome new emphasis on the early grades may not yield the hoped-for improvements in equity and overall achievement if, while correcting for an earlier neglect, we persist in ignoring the content taught in students' formative years.

Consider the fact that some high-performing education systems, such as that of Japan, do not stress formal higher-order skills—such as "learning how to learn," or focusing on problem-solving skills—in early schooling. They pay much closer attention to the sequence and coherence of the content a child receives in the early grades. Nonetheless, the scores of their 8th graders on the so-called higher-order skills connected with reading and reckoning, such as comprehension and problem solving, are not only higher than ours, but are also more equitably distributed among social classes.

Moreover, these results have been achieved within the context of nationalized, bureaucratic, nonmarket education systems. This is not intended as a dismissal of cur-

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK TOMALTY/MASTERFILE



Strategy

Fundamentals

The acquiring of academic skills, including a big vocabulary, consists of building efficient mental systems that enable us to perform huge feats of analysis and synthesis.

rent efforts to introduce more competition into American schooling. It's possible that nations like Japan would elicit even better results by experimenting with market-based reforms. But it does suggest that, at least in these nations, organizational schemes have been less critical to student outcomes than the ideas that have governed teaching and learning.

Higher-Order Skills

The writers of *Risk* believed that the goal of the early grades is to gain proficiency in the skills of reading, writing, thinking, and arithmetic in order to "provide a sound base" for high-school study. They assumed that any sensible content that develops the necessary foundational skills would do.

I have elsewhere called this concept—of skill building through arbitrary content—"educational formalism," the notion that the chief aim of early education is the attainment of formal skills. For the past 20 years our elementary schools have tried to follow the advice of the experts who contributed to *Risk*. They have taught such higher-order skills as "critical thinking," "problem solving," and "looking for the main idea." Yet these turned out to be the very skills on which our students continued to decline compared with students in Asian and European countries—countries that placed less emphasis on formal comprehension skills and more emphasis on coherent year-to-year subject matter.

Cognitive psychology has long since reached a level of sophistication that enables it to explain why it is highly ineffective to teach higher-order skills as formal structures. This finding is the most plausible explanation for the historical paradox that national systems that stress content more than skills nonetheless inculcate these higher-order skills more effectively than systems that try to teach higher-order skills as such. To teach content *is* to teach higher-order skills; to teach higher skills explicitly is to pursue a phantom.

Literate adults already possess the higher reading skills that *Risk* thought could be taught divorced from content. We can think critically about the words we read. But it is unlikely that we gained these proficiencies by being taught them explicitly as formal skills. Few of us learned to find the main idea by being taught to look for it (a favorite with the formalistic approach to comprehension skill). Few of us learned critical-thinking skills by taking formal lessons in critical thinking. How then did we gain these complex skills, and what is their nature?

Working Memory

By the time *Risk* was published in 1983, cognitive psychology had achieved a degree of consensus about the fundamental nature of academic skills. Yet the science of psychology was not often alluded to in *Risk*. Even today, 20 years later, there is little crossover between cognitive science and education policy. *Risk* simply assumed that gaining an academic skill, such as reading, is independent of the curricular content through which the skill is taught. This formalistic conception continues to dominate American education circles. It is a misleading oversimplification that will have to be corrected if our schools are to teach "higher" skills successfully.

The conscious mind, where higher-order skills mostly take place, is limited by a universal, highly democratic constraint called "working memory," whose narrow limits are on average the same for child and adult, rich and poor. It is the "place" where we put things together and create meaning, where we solve problems and process language.

To teach content is to teach higher

In the 1950s George Miller wrote a famous article about the limitations of working memory called "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two." The title was Miller's way of saying that the number of bits of information we can handle in the brief span of working memory is very, very limited—five to nine items at most. The acquiring of academic skills, including, notably, a big vocabulary, consists of building efficient mental systems that enable us, despite this very constrained bottleneck, to perform huge feats of analysis and synthesis.

A famous experiment conducted by Dutch psychologist

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB GOMEL/TIMEPIX

Adrian de Groot illustrated this universal bottleneck in human processing skills. He noticed that chess grand masters have a remarkable skill that we amateurs cannot emulate. They can glance for five seconds at a complex mid-game chess position of 25 pieces, perform an intervening task of some sort, and then reconstruct the entire chess position on a blank chessboard without making any mistakes. Performance on this task correlates almost perfectly with one's chess ranking. Grand masters make no mistakes, masters a very few, and amateurs can get just five or six pieces right. (Remember the magical number seven, plus or minus two.)

On a brilliant hunch, de Groot then performed the same experiment with 25 chess pieces in positions that, instead of being taken from an actual chess game, were just placed at random on the board. Under these new conditions, the performance of the three different groups—grand masters, masters, and novices—was exactly the same, each group remembering just five or six pieces correctly.

The experiment suggests the skill difference between a master reader who can easily reproduce the 16 letters of "the cat is on the mat" and a beginning reader who has trouble reproducing the same letters: t-h-e-c-a-t-i-s-o-n-t-h-e-m-a-t. If, instead of providing expert and child with that sentence, we change the task and ask them to reproduce a sequence of random letters, the performance of the 1st grader and the master reader will become much closer. If the 16 letters were "rtu kjs vb fw nqi pgf," the expert would exhibit little skill advantage over the novice; on average, neither will get more than a short sequence of the letters right.

Practiced readers, chess grand masters, and other experts do not possess any special mental equipment that novices lack, and they do not perform any better than novices on formally similar yet unfamiliar tasks. Nonetheless, experts are able to perform remarkable feats of memory with real-world situations such as mid-game chess positions and actual sentences. How do they manage?

rder skills. To teach higher skills explicitly is to pursue a phantom. ”

Activating the Knowledge Bank

The sentence "The cat is on the mat" consists of six words that are easily remembered. Expert readers can easily reproduce the 16 letters, not because the letters are individually remembered, but because they are reconstructed from previous knowledge of written English. What de Groot found, and subsequent research has continually confirmed, is that the difference in higher-order skill between a novice and an expert lies not in mental muscles but in what de Groot called "erudition," a vast store of available, relevant, previously acquired knowledge.

Despite the narrow limitations of working memory, the wealth of contents that can be manipulated by experts through this previously acquired "erudition" is immense. If I already know a lot about baseball, the term "sacrifice fly" can represent a page or two of exposition. Such shorthand representation is a chief timesaving technique of higher-order skills. A short, manageable element (like a phrase) can represent a much larger complex of already-learned meaning. The phrase "World War II" is short and therefore easily remembered, but the content represented by the phrase is enormous. It cannot be grasped by those who, however skillful in other ways, lack that relevant knowledge.

I use this example as a rapid way of indicating why an academic skill like reading depends on learning much more than the foundational ability to form sounds from symbols, turn the sounds into words, and put the words together in sentences. While such formal skills are critically important, they are quite insufficient to comprehend a passage about World War II in the absence of relevant background knowledge. A shorthand way of saying this is that the skill of reading (and listening) depends on, among other things, a previous knowledge of what most of the words in a text mean and refer to.

Developing Expertise

De Groot showed that being an expert in chess does not improve one's memory for randomized chess positions. Tracing the implications of that discovery, psychologists have found that being a critical thinker in chess is even less likely to improve one's skills in areas that are still more remote from chess, like mathematical problem solving or the ability to think logically about politics.

Being good at one mental skill does not necessarily train the mind to be skilled in other domains. This is one of the most solid findings in psychology, confirmed and reconfirmed many times—tested so often possibly because it has been such a surprising and unwelcome finding. People who have just finished a course in logic are barely more logical than those who have never taken such a course. People who have been carefully trained how to solve a problem in one domain are rarely able to solve a problem that has identical structure but lies in a different domain. Those who are skilled at diverse tasks in various domains are people who have managed to acquire broad general knowledge that includes knowledge relevant to those diverse domains. Such generalized skill is in fact a practical aim of a broad, general education. Students who score well on the verbal SAT invariably possess a broad vocabulary that represents broad general knowledge—which is hardly surprising,

> "The difference in higher-order skill between a novice and an expert lies not in mental muscles but in 'erudition,' a vast store of previously acquired knowledge."

given that the verbal SAT is essentially an advanced vocabulary test.

For practical purposes there are no such things as transferable higher skills of problem solving and reading comprehension. The ability to solve a math problem depends on having a specifically relevant and available math vocabulary. The ability to comprehend a printed text depends on having a specifically relevant and available linguistic vocabulary that comprises at least 90 percent of the words of the text. The vague hope that students will be able to apply what they know in depth about supermarkets to new domains is not sustained by experience or psychological theory.

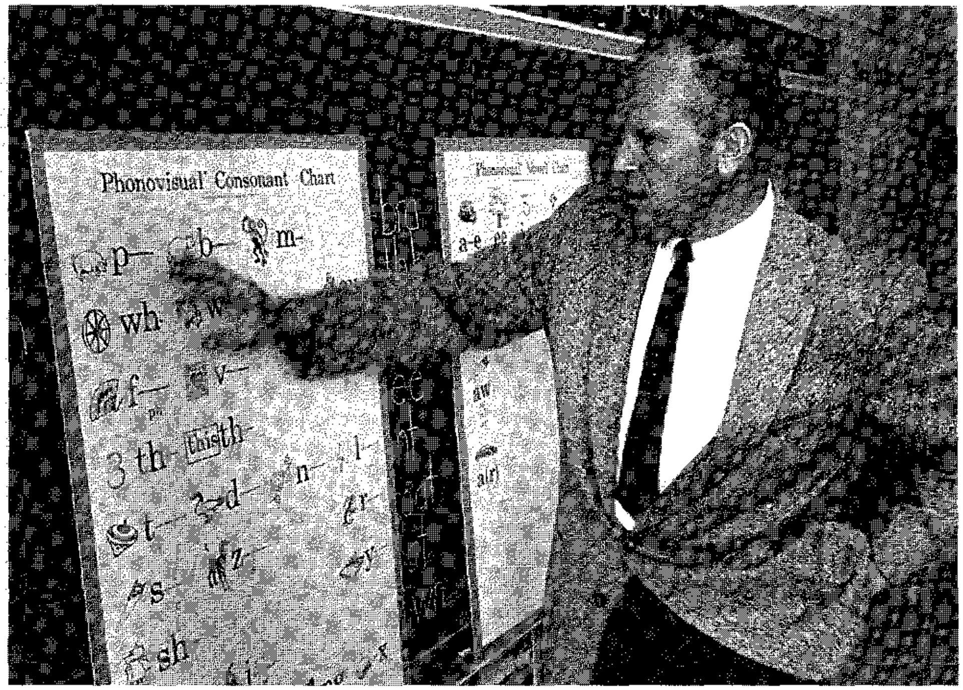
This is not to say that the mental transfer of structure from one problem to another never occurs. On the contrary, one of the features of expert performance in a domain (after about ten years of practice) is the ability to intuit the deep structure of problems and their connections with other problems in that domain. But this is a kind of skill that comes after long experience.

If mental transfer is difficult among problems within a domain, it is exceedingly rare from one domain to another. It represents the pinnacle of human thought, the epitome of creative thinking. When it happens, a new art form or field of thought is born. The great physicist Erwin Schroedinger wrote a little book entitled *What Is Life?* in which he suggested that life is a kind of crystal that enables the living molecule to replicate itself, as do the molecules of a crystal. This thought transfer from physics to biology was so captivating that it caused a whole generation of physicists to turn their attention to biology, resulting in the Crick-Watson discovery of DNA, and ultimately in the transformation of modern biology and medicine. For most of us, though, most of the time, such leaps of thought are very rare precisely because they are so difficult.

A Coherent Curriculum

Our American faith that teaching students biology will teach them "the nature of science" or that teaching students to think critically about the Civil War will teach them how to think critically about current affairs is supported neither by large-scale research nor by the laboratory. The practical result of our faith in the transferability of higher skills has been an incoherent curriculum that is especially damaging to those students who have not gained broad academic knowledge outside of school.

There are clear policy implications to be drawn from understanding the domain- and content-specific character of higher-order skills. These do not include continuing to follow popular slogans about local control of curriculum and letting a thousand flowers bloom. The goal of a literate citizenry can be reached only by offering ideas for education reform that specify a coherent curriculum. The writers of *Risk* did not recommend a coherent, specified grade-by-grade elementary curriculum because its writers did not understand as fully as we do now the degree to which higher skills are dependent on a sound base of general knowledge. Schools cannot be sure of offering all students a sound base of general knowledge until the states *specify* the core content of the early curriculum.



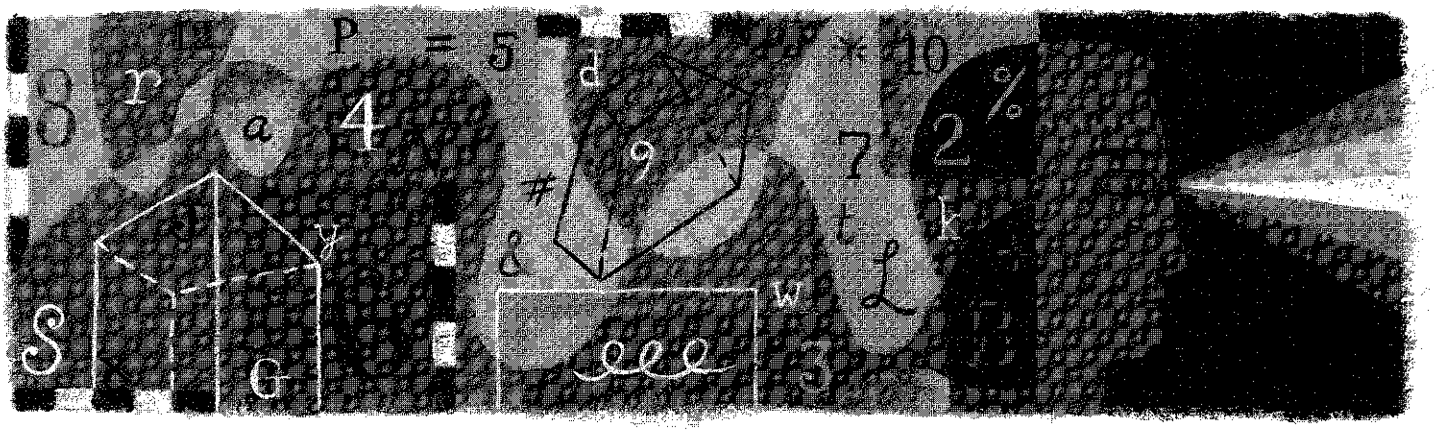
The ability to comprehend a printed text depends on having a specifically relevant and available linguistic vocabulary.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB GOMEL/TIMEPIX

–E. D. Hirsch Jr. is a professor emeritus of English and education at the University of Virginia, founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution.

feature

the Least Common Denominator



The effort to push underprepared students into academic courses has driven the rigor out of many textbooks and classrooms

by

WILLIAMSON M. EVERS AND PAUL CLOPTON

STILL AT RISK

A Nation at Risk argued that much of America's decline in academic achievement could be traced to the "cafeteria-style curriculum" or "curricular smorgasbord" offered to high-school students. The report said that the presence of so many nonacademic courses in the curriculum—such as preparation for adulthood, off-campus work experiences, and physical and health education—was compromising America's commitment to high-quality academics. This, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was the result of society's placing a "multitude of often conflicting demands" on the schools, which were asked to solve "personal, social, and political problems" that the home and other social institutions were failing to fix.

Risk charged the larger society with the sin of burdening schools with so many nonacademic responsibilities. Yet it appears at least as likely that the schools eagerly took on these burdens.

Bureaucracies like to grow, to widen their mission, to take on more duties and thereby expand their budgets and influence. That's as true of public schools as of any other agency. The "comprehensive" high school, for example, could grow ever *more* comprehensive by offering more courses, many of them nonacademic.

This was not just a bureaucratic imperative; it also followed the thinking of progressive educators, who viewed the 19th-century high

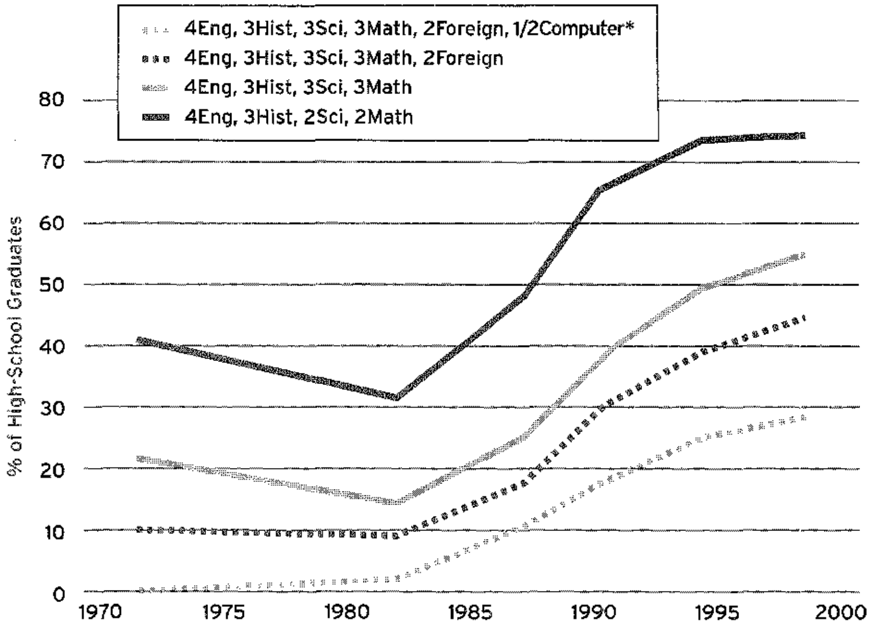
ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES STEINBERG

school as elitist, dominated by the wishes of college officials. Progressive educators believed that in order to make high schools more "democratic" they needed to provide most students a different curriculum, one that included a multitude of practical, problem-solving courses that were supposedly "relevant."

Once progressive educators gave up academic content as the basis for the curriculum, they were prey to all sorts of crackpot fads. They made pseudoscientific predictions about children's futures. They decided schools had to help students adjust to adulthood. They tried to reshape the curriculum to advance utopian political ideas. Under the influence of progressive educators, the curriculum was filled with watered-down and nonacademic courses.

Taking the "New Basics" (Figure 1)

A Nation at Risk *recommended that high-school students be required to take a series of courses it called the "New Basics." By 1998, 29 percent of graduates were meeting this standard, up from just 2 percent in 1982.*



* 4Eng = 4 years of English; 3Hist = 3 years of history; 3Sci = 3 years of science, 3Math = 3 years of mathematics; 2Foreign = 2 years of a foreign language; 1/2 Computer = half a year of computer science.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education. Figure created by Caroline M. Hoxby

The New Basics

The commission's antidote to the curricular smorgasbord was to recommend that all high-school students be required to take a set of courses called the "New Basics." The New Basics required every prospective graduate to take a minimum of four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and half a year of computer science. College-bound students were also advised to study a foreign language for at least two years.

High schools responded favorably to this admonition, at least superficially. The share of students completing the New Basics rose from 2 percent in 1982 to 29 percent in 1998 (see Figure 1). If you put aside the computer-science requirement, the increase was from 10 percent to 44 percent.

> “Once progressive educators gave up academic content as the basis for the curriculum, they were prey to all sorts of crackpot fads.”

Completion rates for specific mathematics and science courses increased dramatically as well. The percentage of high-school graduates who took Geometry increased from 47 percent to 70 percent; the rate for Algebra II rose from 40 percent to 62 percent; and for Precalculus, it went from 6 percent to 23 percent. Less substantial increases were seen in Chemistry, Physics, and Biology (see Figures 2 & 3 in Caroline Hoxby, "Reforms for Whom?" p. 47).

Such notable gains in academic course taking should have resulted in impressive gains in achievement. However, as Paul Peterson shows (see "Ticket to Nowhere," p. 39), long-term trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal only small increases in mathematics and science scores after 1982, when scores for 17-year-olds reached their nadir.

Even more worrisome is the fact that these achievement levels on NAEP are considerably lower than would be expected from students who are taking rigorous academic classes. Consider the performance description for students scoring 350 on the NAEP mathematics scale—a score well above the average achievement level:

> *Students at this level can apply a range of reasoning skills to solve multi-step problems. They can solve routine problems*

involving fractions and percents, recognize properties of basic geometric figures, and work with exponents and square roots. They can solve a variety of two-step problems using variables, identify equivalent algebraic expressions, and solve linear equations and inequalities. They are developing an understanding of functions and coordinate systems.

This definition does not describe work at the Precalculus level or even the Algebra II level; it more closely resembles the less difficult content from Algebra I and Geometry. Yet even the average among top-quartile students in the United States has never reached this level.

The relative weakness of even our most advanced students is confirmed by scores on the advanced physics and mathematics components of the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which is administered only to students who have taken these courses. In physics the United States scored significantly lower than 14 of the 15 participating countries; in advanced math U.S. scores were significantly lower than those of 11 of 15 participating countries. On neither exam was the U.S. score significantly higher than that of any other nation. Nor did we register any improvement from the Second International Mathematics Study, conducted in the early 1980s.

Diluting the Solution

These divergent trends—simultaneous increased enrollment in academic courses and stagnant achievement—suggest an hypothesis: in order to accommodate a wider range of student abilities and previous attainments in academic courses, the content of those courses has been diluted. This may be the inevitable consequence of policies that stress uniform academic treatments for all students.

First consider evidence from studies of curriculum and textbooks. The serious deterioration of textbook content appears to have begun in the 1960s. The late Jeanne Chall and Sue S. Conard studied widely used textbooks covering the period from 1945 to 1975 and noted, "On the whole, the later the copyright dates of the textbooks for the same grade, the easier they were, as measured by indices of readability level, maturity level, difficulty of questions, and extent of illustration."

There is reason to believe that curriculum materials have continued to weaken since the publication of *Risk*. The so-called "math wars" were prompted by the release of newer texts seen as grossly inadequate because of their deemphasis of rich content. The unchallenging curriculum stimulated the growth of parent-led protest organizations such as HOLD and Mathematically Correct. Many of the offending new mathematics programs were sponsored by, of all institutions, the National Science Foundation.

For instance, one of these programs, the Core-Plus Mathematics Project, was found by a reviewer to have "generated massive resentment among the students who were the experimental subjects during early implementation. Many students found themselves ill prepared for college, even though they came from highly educated homes and had a high likelihood of success." Just one example of the sheer vacuity of Core-Plus is that it had no section at all on factoring polynomials.

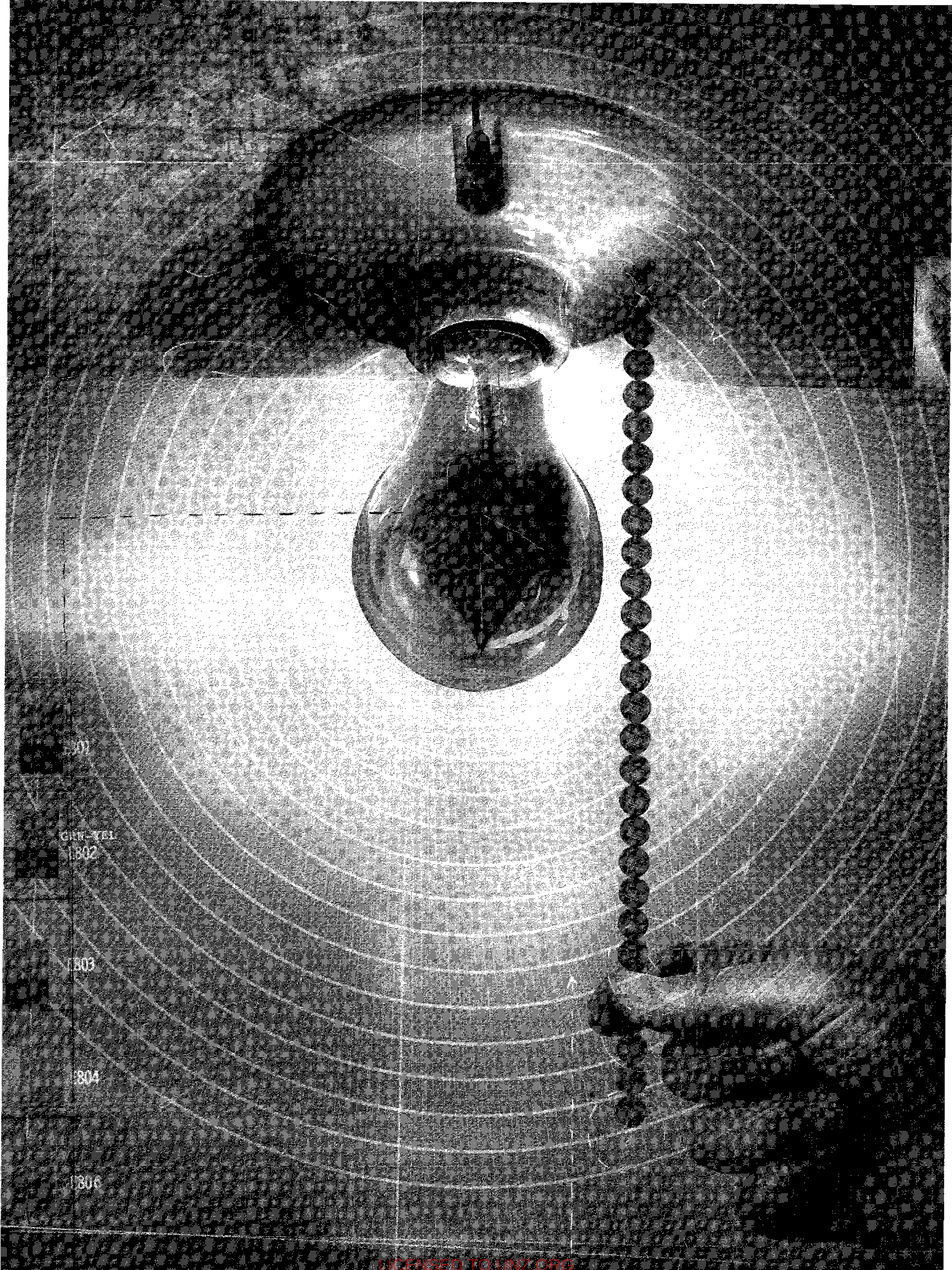
> "Many of the offending new mathematics programs were sponsored by, **of all institutions, the National Science Foundation.**"

Another measure of the degree to which high-school academic courses have been watered down is provided by achievement scores in districts and schools where more children are taking academic courses. Consider data on algebra enrollments and achievement from California. There is a negative partial correlation of .67 between enrollment and achievement among individual schools in 8th-grade algebra, meaning that high enrollment percentages in algebra were correlated with lower scores. This was after controlling for students' mean achievement in 7th-grade math the previous year, which establishes that the correlation is not simply the result of diluting the test-taking pool with more students.

This suggests that the more students a school enrolls in algebra, the more school officials feel the need to use curriculum materials with less challenging content. Flooding academic courses with underprepared students may have had the net effect of driving the rigor out of these courses.

The best course of action is for high schools to reinstate truly rigorous academic courses, but to differentiate among students with respect to the extent and rate of progress through the sequence of courses. For example, multiple levels of diplomas could be offered based on courses completed, although this progress should still be verified by external exams, as in the International Baccalaureate program. This would be a major improvement over the other form of differentiated curriculum (rigorous content for the college-bound, nonacademic content for the rest) that *A Nation at Risk* warned against, while also respecting the fact that not all students can handle the same lockstep schedule of rigorous courses.

–Williamson M. Evers is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. Paul Clopton is a biomedical research statistician with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.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accountability unPLUGGED

The nation doesn't yet know whether accountability-based reforms will work, because they have barely been tried

by HERBERT J. WALBERG

A NATION AT RISK foreshadowed the modern accountability movement. While the word "accountability" never appears in *Risk*, its call for higher academic standards and its focus on student achievement as the main barometer of quality laid the intellectual groundwork for the rigorous curricula and tests envisioned by the promoters of standards-based and "systemic" reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What *Risk* lacked was a mechanism to ensure that its recommendations would be implemented. Its authors trusted the nation and its schools to rally around the cause of education reform. The rewards and sanctions, the carrots and sticks, of the modern accountability movement were absent from *Risk*.

A significant milestone in the accountability movement was the National Governors' Association's 1989 "Education Summit" in Charlottesville, Virginia, at which then-president George Bush, the nation's governors, and business leaders gave impetus to business-style accountability for schools (see Table 1 for a timeline of accountability). Systemic reform, as recommended by summiteers, meant aligning the chief components of education: academic goals, curricula, instruction, and exams.

STILL AT RISK

School accountability was thought to require simultaneous centralization and decentralization: the centralization of standards at the state level and the decentralization of operational responsibilities to the district or school level. State policymakers were to set goals and measure progress, but to free local school districts and schools to develop and execute effective practices.

The development of state curriculum standards and tests aligned to the standards continued throughout the 1990s. However, the sanctions for poor performance have barely even been tested. In nearly all states, schools and educators continue to function and remain employed even when gross incompetence and malpractice have been evident for years. As a result, not even one of the National Educational Goals set at the 1989 Charlottesville summit has been accomplished (see Table 2). Some results, such as high-school graduation rates, were even worse after a decade or so of effort. Only one state, Connecticut, could claim that more than a third of its students met the standards for "proficiency" in 8th-grade mathematics set by the National Assessment Governing Board, which Congress created to set forth national standards and to measure their degree of attainment.

ILLUSTRATION BY STUART BRADFORD

The Accountability Movement Builds Momentum (Table 1)

YEAR	EVENT
1988	• Congress creates the National Assessment Governing Board to develop assessments and standards.
1989	• President Bush calls National Education Summit of state governors to establish education goals for the year 2000.
1991	• National Assessment Governing Board releases first valid comparisons of states' achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.
1994	• President Clinton signs the Goals 2000 program into law. • Major overhaul of Elementary and Secondary Education Act and federal Title I program requires states to develop content standards and assessments linked to the standards.
1996	• The second National Education Summit of governors pledges to set standards at the state and local levels. • Southern Regional Education Board releases report showing that states around the country have much lower standards than the National Assessment.
1998	• Thirty-eight states have adopted state standards in core academic subjects.
2002	• President George W. Bush signs No Child Left Behind Act, which calls for states to develop challenging standards for all students to meet within 12 years.

SOURCE: Author

The underlying standards are also weak in most states. In studying state accountability systems in 1999, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation labeled 21 states "irresponsible," possessing both weak accountability and either weak or no standards. Only eight states—Alabama, Arizona, California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Dakota, South Carolina, and Texas—merited a grade of A or B for their solid standards.

What do good standards look like? The Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework is notable. The framework begins with three convictions: that democracy is the worthiest form of government, that its spread cannot be taken for granted, and that its survival depends on each new generation's acquiring loyalty to the vision of the American founders.

In seven "Guiding Principles," the framework sets forth requirements for all K–12 history and social science content: courses must 1) emphasize the development of the political principles and institutions of Western civilization; 2) recognize each person as an individual while developing a common American civic identity; 3) develop an understanding of the world outside the United States; 4) teach social science through current events and public policy; 5) continuously impart history and social science from pre-K through high school; 6) integrate content, concepts, and skills in a coherent course of study; and 7) draw on non–social science disciplines such as the fine arts, literature, and mathematics. These principles are exemplified in the ten concepts and skills for 2nd grade that are enumerated in Table 3.

Failing Grade (Table 2)

In 1989, the nation's governors set National Education Goals for the country to meet by the year 2000. Despite reform efforts and a growing accountability movement, the nation failed to achieve any of the goals. In some areas, the nation has slipped even further behind.

GOAL	INDICATOR	As of '89	As of '99
All children in America will start school ready to learn	% of 3- and 5-year-olds whose parents read to them regularly	66%	69%
High-school graduation rates will increase to at least 90 percent	% of 18- to 24-year-olds with a high-school credential (including GED)	86%	85%
All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter	% of students scoring at "proficient" level on National Assessment of Educational Progress in various subjects	12% to 40%	16% to 40%
U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement	U.S. rank on international assessments	No	No
Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy	% of adults who score at the three highest literacy levels	52%	No Update
Every school will promote parental partnerships	Parents report that they participated in two or more school activities per year	63%	62%

Adapted by the author from National Education Goals Panel, *The National Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners*, 1999

Those states that have instituted reasonably tough standards and accountability systems have experienced real gains in achievement. In particular, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores of Texas and North Carolina advanced more than in any other state under accountability systems that included:

- grade-by-grade standards with aligned curricula and textbooks;
- statewide assessments linked to the standards;
- accountability for results, with rewards and sanctions for performance;
- deregulation and increased flexibility in ways the standards can be met; and
- computerized feedback systems and publicly available data on achievement.

Though some educators have protested the expense of accountability systems, Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby has found that they represent a minuscule percentage of school budgets. The payments to commercial firms for standardized testing, standard setting, and accountability in year 2000 amounted to $234 million, less than 0.1 percent of K–12 spending. On average, this represented $5.81 per American student and ranged between $1.79 and $34 for the 25 states with information available. Moreover, these costs will undoubtedly decline in the longer run. They were estimated as states were developing their accountability systems. Once the systems are established, much of the activity can be routinized at lower costs.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) represents, at least in principle, the biggest step ever in bringing accountability to the schools. The question is whether its mandates will be well implemented, if they're implemented at all. After all, as of 2001, only 19 states had complied with requirements of the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Many states would have to expend considerable effort to be in nominal compliance with the new law. Indeed, as of September 2002, at least five states had the mistaken impression that they need not meet a key requirement of NCLB for the present school year: to provide tutoring and other supplemental services for students in failing schools.

It remains to be seen whether the federal government will withhold funds from congressional districts that fail to comply with the law. Even if the mandates are well implemented, there are reasons to doubt the ability of NCLB to raise achievement. At the end of the day, no matter what 50 state departments of education discover in the many complex pages of federal legislation and then promulgate as official policy to local districts and schools, teachers may continue as they please. Despite the policy crescendo of state standards, tests, and accountability, a gulf remains between what teachers teach and what is called for in the kind of standards-based reform represented by NCLB. For accountability to work, it must invade the prime sanctuary in today's schools: the classroom.

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Massachusetts 2nd-Grade Standards for History and Social Studies (Table 3)

History and Geography

1. Use a calendar to identify days, weeks, months, years, and seasons.
2. Use words and phrases related to time (now, in the past, in the future), changing historical periods (other times, other places), and causation (because, reasons) correctly.
3. Explain the information that historical timelines convey and then put events in the student's life in chronological order (such as the year he or she was born, started school, or moved to a new neighborhood) or in the history of countries studied.
4. Describe how maps and globes depict geographical information in different ways.
5. Read globes and maps and follow narrative accounts on them.
6. Identify cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west) and apply them to maps, locations in the classroom, school, playground, and community.

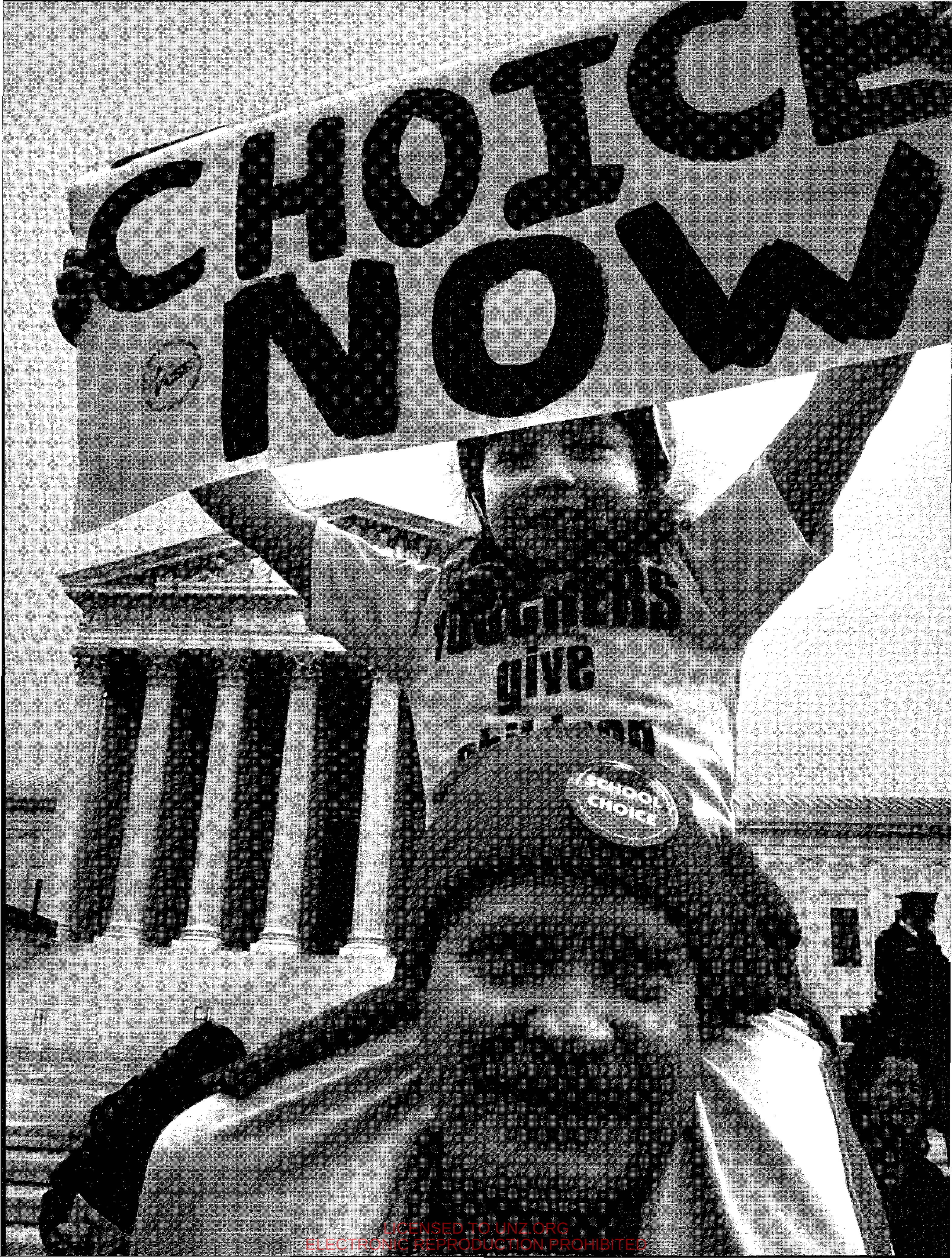
Civics and Government

7. Define and give examples of some of the rights and responsibilities that students as citizens have in the school (for example, students have the right to vote in a class election but have the responsibility to follow school rules).
8. Give examples of fictional characters or real people in the school or community who were good leaders and good citizens, and explain the qualities that made them admirable (e.g., honesty, dependability, modesty, trustworthiness, courage).

Economics

9. Give examples of people in the school and community who are both producers and consumers.
10. Explain what buyers and sellers are and give examples of goods and services that are bought and sold in their community.

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Education, History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, Final Draft


CHOICE
NOW
give
SCHOOL CHOICE

Ignoring the MARKET

by JOHN E. CHUBB

A *NATION AT RISK*'S MOST FATAL FLAW WAS ITS faith in the American education system's ability to act on its recommendations. The authors of *Risk* believed that the system was mainly in need of internal reforms: tougher coursework and graduation requirements, higher and more flexible salaries for teachers, a longer school day and year. Despite its origins within the Reagan administration, the National Commission on Excellence in Education didn't even regard market-based reforms as sufficiently important to include them among the scores of topics on which it contracted for background research.

This thinking quickly proved to be shortsighted. In 1982, James S. Coleman, perhaps the most significant academic figure in education policymaking of the past 50 years, produced a study, with Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, demonstrating that students perform better in private schools, and particularly Catholic schools, than in public schools, all else being equal. Coleman and his colleagues also showed that Catholic schools, more than public schools, approached the "common school" ideal of serving all children equally. A follow-up study in 1987 reinforced these findings, showing that private school attendees fared better after high school than their public school counterparts. Coleman attributed this to the greater sense of community in private schools, a feature he labeled "social capital." Taken together, the findings suggested that policymakers ought to consider providing public support for education in private schools.

Coleman's research focused on the attributes that made private schools more effective. The question was, What caused private schools to develop such attributes more successfully than public schools? A 1990 study, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, performed by this author and Terry M. Moe, attempted to answer that question. We concluded that private schools tend to outperform public schools because the market environment in which private schools operate is far more conducive to success than the political environment in which public schools function.

The study found that market forces systematically promote the very attributes that,

A Nation at Risk *virtually overlooked school choice, education's most promising reform strategy*

STILL AT RISK?

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE KUYKENDAL

according to Coleman, are characteristic of effective schools. The competitive pressures of the marketplace, where families can take or leave a school, lead schools to organize in ways that please families. Schools subject to market pressures tend to develop clear missions (parents know what the school stands for), focus on academics (parents want to see their children learn), encourage strong site-based leadership (great schools are headed by principals who take charge of student achievement), and build collaborative faculties (great schools make achievement a team effort).

By contrast, the political forces that surround public schools—particularly schools in troubled urban systems—tend to promote excessive bureaucracy and to impede the development of the qualities that schools need to succeed. School missions get diluted by repeated rounds of school reform; academics get crowded out by new policy goals; principals become middle-managers carrying out the programs chosen by district administrators; and teachers become "labor," fulfilling contractual obligations instead of doing whatever is necessary to succeed. These are only central tendencies, to be sure. Markets tolerate a certain number of terrible private schools, and politics produce many exemplary public schools. However, to the extent that politics and markets cause schools to tend sharply in different directions, the central tendencies are extremely important.

Creating Movements

These studies gave intellectual inspiration and firepower to a generation of political leaders, scholars, and activists who committed themselves to market-based reforms as a strategy for school improvement. They succeeded in creating small publicly funded voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland and a network of privately financed scholarship programs in other cities nationwide. Altogether, nearly 60,000 students were attending private schools instead of public schools with public or philanthropic support in 2002. And the Supreme Court's 2002 decision in the Cleveland voucher case lowered a major barrier to the expansion of publicly funded programs: namely, the chance that they might be declared unconstitutional because of an excessive entanglement between government and religion.

At the same time, the charter school movement was creating markets in several states and cities. The movement benefited greatly from the support of Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, who introduced the idea in a 1988 speech. He argued that teachers should be granted charters to run public schools of choice, free from the regulations that frustrate teachers, but subject to strict accountability requirements. Shanker, a rare visionary among union leaders, was looking for a bold way to respond to escalating demands for radical school improvement. Charters were Shanker's way of saying that the union could see the virtue of a more market-like system if it were carefully controlled and if teachers played a central role.

Charters also appealed to the first Bush administration's fascination with "break the mold schools," exemplified by the New American Schools initiative. Private schools, effective as they might be, were not being touted for their inventiveness. If anything, their no-nonsense traditionalism was the main attraction. Charter schools offered something different: the prospect of new approaches to schooling. Charters enjoyed further appeal because they fit with the popular notion of "reinventing government." Charter schools offered a way to improve a government service by making it more entrepreneurial instead of simply turning the service over to the private sector.

The growth of charter schools has also fueled the growth of school management firms (and vice versa), another key to the transformation of education through market forces. In 2002, private for-profit firms ran an estimated 370 public schools in the United States. How did private management, scarcely an idea in 1983, grow so rapidly? Because the ensuing 20 years created a market for them. This is important to appreciate, for critics of school choice often ask where students are going to go once the "good schools" are all full. Critics want evidence that a market for schools will generate a new and improved supply of schools. Charter schools and private managers provide that evidence.

Charter schools created a vehicle through which for-profit managers could enter the market for new schools. Although most states require charter holders to be nonprofit entities, they permit charter holders to contract with for-profit firms for various goods and services, including the comprehensive management of schools. For-profit companies can easily enter the market by assembling a nonprofit board to serve as a partner. Charter boards also seek out management companies. Opening and running a school can be a daunting task, one that part-time boards often delegate to professional managers.

But this is only one source of for-profit growth, and in the long run perhaps not the more important source. Private companies are beginning to run schools for public school districts. In the years since *A Nation at Risk*, public school systems have come under tremendous pressure to improve. Private management companies have responded to these pressures by offering comprehensive reform packages that districts can contract to be implemented in schools that either need or want to try major reform. Contracting enables a school district to introduce new and improved choices for families who might be thinking of switching to a charter or private school—and to do so quickly. Contracting also enables a district to assign schools with particular academic challenges—say, the lowest test scores—to a private manager, while devoting its energies to district-wide improvements.

Forty companies were in the business of education management in 2002. Thirty-six actually managed schools. Many were just getting started and ran only a school or two, but 15 firms managed at least five schools, and several firms were growing rapidly. The largest is Edison Schools, which managed more than one hundred schools and served 73,000 students in 2001–02. Next in size is Chancellor Beacon, a merged company with 44 schools; the Leona Group, with 33 schools; National Heritage, with 28 schools; and Mosaica, with 22 schools. Together these firms educated 143,000 students in 24 states in 2002.

Creating a Market

Nonetheless, if market-based reform is to realize the potential it has begun to demonstrate in the years since the release of *Risk*, policymakers must take additional measures both to promote it and to guide it. Markets are not perfect. They must be carefully watched if they are to be fair and effective. The keys to creating an effective market in education are:

- *The states' continuing development of accountability systems for public schools.* Accountability systems provide the information and data necessary for parents to make wise choices. For each school, states must report their standardized test scores, college entrance exam scores, graduation rates, and student attendance. States should report how a school's test scores and test-score gains compare with the scores and gains of demographically similar schools across the state and locally. States should also provide information that might bear on the ability of the school to do a good job—for example, the percentages of teachers with degrees in the subject they are teaching and teacher attendance rates. Opponents of school choice worry that only savvy parents will make good choices. States can ensure that all parents are able to make good choices by providing them with the right information.
- *Enabling charter schools to compete vigorously and fairly with district schools.* States must remove all limits on the number of charter schools that may operate in a state or locale. Let families and the marketplace decide what the right number of charters should be. If traditional public schools are doing their jobs, charters will not experience explosive growth. In addition, states should not give local school systems the ability to veto charter applications within their jurisdictions. States should allow public bodies not tied directly to the education establishment—for example, public universities—to grant charters. Charter schools should also be supported financially at the same level as district schools, including funds for facilities.
- *Enabling district schools to compete effectively with charter schools.* States must relax the regulations governing curricula, textbooks, teacher certification, staffing, minutes of instruction, and anything else that is substantially relaxed for charter schools. In the end, health and safety regulations, nondiscrimination requirements, and academic standards should compose most of the state regulatory regimen. In opposing choice, traditional public schools have often argued that regulation makes competition unfair. Precisely: let's give all schools the flexibility to shape their programs in the best interests of their students and compete for their support.
- *Capturing the benefits of private schooling.* Any effort to revolutionize American education by putting more power in the hands of parents should not overlook the country's rich resource of private schools. Roughly one in nine students in the United States is educated in a private school. Most of these schools educate a cross section of students and operate for a fraction of what public schools spend. Catholic schools are a prime example. In America's inner cities, private schools offer the only immediately available alternative to district schools. Charter schools will spring up in time, but meanwhile states should provide vouchers for private schools. These vouchers should be limited to low-income families, since they are the ones most desperately in need of choices. The voucher should be for less than the per-pupil allocation to charter schools—say, 15 percent less—since the main objective is to promote the growth of charter schools, not private schools. Private schools should be required to take vouchers as payment in full for their services: private schools should not be permitted to discriminate against families who are unable to top off the tuition with personal funds. Private schools should also be required to administer whatever tests are part of the state accountability system, if a majority of a school's students attend with the benefit of vouchers. However, private schools should not be held to any other accountability standards that might apply to charter schools. In an education marketplace brimming with information, private schools will need to persuade families of their worth. Private schools should therefore be trusted to provide ample information about their performance on their own.

These recommendations are not mere *school* reforms. These recommendations promise fundamental change in the way the American education system operates. They promise to strengthen public education by making it more accountable for student achievement, more attentive to the wishes of families, and more innovative in its use of scarce resources. They promote the influence of market forces but keep democratic authority ultimately in control, regulating the market for the public good. In the end, progress on the goals enumerated in the *Risk* report will depend less on the reforms it advocated than on reforms that it failed to anticipate altogether.

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LOST opportunity

by ERIC A. HANUSHEK

THE CONCERNS ABOUT SCHOOL QUALITY EXPRESSED IN *A Nation at Risk* reflected declining trends in performance among U.S. students and their mediocre standing relative to students in other nations. America's failure to address these concerns has led to substantial losses for individuals and for society as a whole. The workers who failed to acquire essential skills can attest to the fact that their earnings have not kept up with those of the typical worker. And the aggregate effects are even more dramatic.

By some estimates, today's entire K–12 education budget could be funded by the "reform dividend" that might have been expected from improving math and science achievement in response to the calls of the 1983 report. To wit, improvements in the schools would have boosted U.S. economic growth, and the annual windfall by 2002 would have exceeded total K–12 spending for that year.

Quality Matters

Much of the research on the economic impact of education has properly concentrated on the role of school attainment—that is, the quantity of schooling. This focus is natural. The revolution in the United States during the 20th century was the universal provision of a basic education. Moreover, years of schooling are easily measured, and data on years attained, both over time and across individuals, are readily available.

Yet today's policy concerns revolve around issues of quality much more than of quantity. Completion rates for high school and college have been roughly constant for a quarter of a century in the United States, while the rest of the industrialized world has largely caught up on measures of school attainment. *Risk* was more concerned with the fact that U.S. students had fallen behind their peers in nations like Japan, the Netherlands, and France on international exams in math and science (see Figure 4, page 44, in Paul E. Peterson, "Ticket to Nowhere"). These concerns sparked the standards and accountability movement, which seeks to define what students should learn and tests to see whether they have mastered the material.

Increased economic growth, fueled by improvements in student performance, might have funded the nation's entire K–12 education budget by now

STILL AT RISK

In good part because of the impact of the *Risk* report, it is now generally recognized that students' cognitive skills are a crucial dimension of education quality. But it has not, until recently, been clear just how important differences in cognitive skill are for the long-term well-being of a nation's economy. Fortunately, data are now available that allow one to estimate the connection between cognitive skill and the economy. The conclusions of this emerging body of research are clear: education quality, as measured by test scores, is positively related to the earnings of individuals, national productivity, and economic growth.

Individual Earnings

Just as most parents believe, economists have clearly shown that a student's achievement in school directly affects his or her earnings later in life, after allowing for differences in the quantity of schooling, experience in the labor force, and a variety of other factors that also influence earnings. Students who do well in school also tend to go on for further schooling, which provides an additional boost to their earnings. As is well known, the economic benefits of a college education have risen dramatically during the past quarter century, and substantial evidence shows that students with good grades or high scores on achievement tests tend to pursue more education.

These facts are part of the reason that so much attention has been paid to the schools as an agency of equal opportunity, ultimately helping to reduce inequities in the distribution of income. Long before the *Risk* report, the War on Poverty saw schools as key to reducing racial and other disparities in economic opportunity. Through schooling it was hoped that family poverty would not be transferred to the next generation: high-quality school investments would make up for deficits originating in the home.

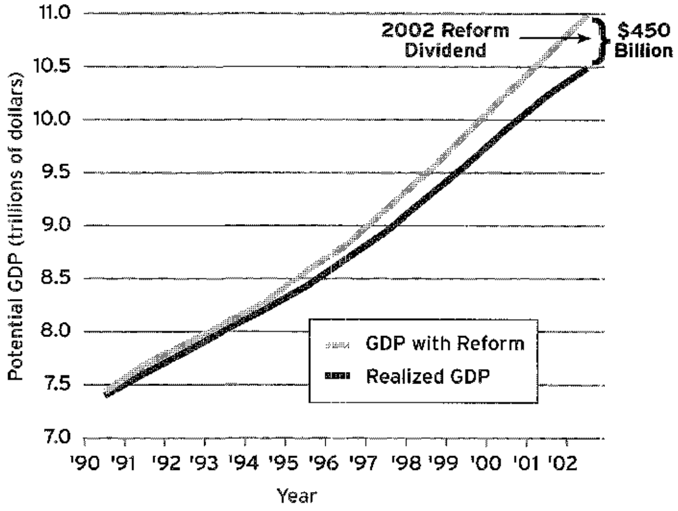
Today, many believe that the continuing difference between the earnings of black and white workers is due in good part to differences in their educational achievement, as measured by tests of cognitive ability. These continuing differences are especially worrisome, given the fact that the importance of education for the acquisition of well-paying jobs continues to grow, increasing the disparities in income between those with college degrees and those with less than a high-school diploma. Only if skill levels can be enhanced within high schools will many of the more disadvantaged in society have access to the college education that is crucial in a society where high-level skills are fundamental to success.

Economic Growth

No less important is the overall relationship between the quality of the labor force, as measured by tests of cognitive skill, and economic growth. Economic growth rates determine how much improvement will occur in society's overall standard of living. Moreover, the education of each individual has the possibility of making others better off (in addition to the increased earnings the individual receives). For instance, a more educated society may have higher rates of invention; may make everyone more productive by virtue of the fact that firms are better able to introduce new, more sophisticated production methods; and may lead to the more rapid introduction of new technologies. These "externalities" that make everyone better off provide still another reason for taking measures that will enhance the quality—not just the quantity—of schooling.

The Reform Dividend (Figure 1)

The nation may have missed out on $450 billion worth of economic output in 2002 as a result of the failure to raise student achievement in the wake of A Nation at Risk.



SOURCE: Author's calculations using Congressional Budget Office data on potential Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Recent work in which Dennis Kimko and I have been engaged has looked closely at the size of the impact of labor force quality, as measured by tests of cognitive ability, on the economic growth of countries. Our study has drawn on information about the mathematics and science performance of students in many countries during the past four decades. In making our estimates, we take into account differences between countries in their level of income, the average number of years students are in school, and population growth rates. We find that a difference of one standard deviation in test performance is related to a 1 percent difference in annual growth rates of per-capita gross domestic product (GDP). This suggests that school quality has a great impact on economic productivity and growth. To some, 1 percent may not appear to be a large number. But a 1 percent increase each year in the growth rate of a country soon compounds to a very large number. Consider the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, for example. In the year 2000, GDP per capita was $34,950. An annual growth rate of 1 percent raises average income to no less than $57,480 in 2050—more than a 50 percent increase over the period. Quite simply, small differences in growth rates have huge implications for the income and wealth of society.

If education has such a dramatic impact on a country's economic productivity and growth, what are the implications of a less-than-adequate education system for economic growth today and in the future? Can the U.S. economy continue to lead the world when the performance of its students on international tests in math and science has been mediocre at best? Some believe it can, that strengths in other areas compensate for America's educational deficiencies. The United States, for example, has more open and competitive markets and less intrusive government regulation than do the economies of many other industrialized societies. In addition, its system of higher education is the envy of the world. But these assets only mean that the United States may well have enjoyed even greater economic productivity had it enhanced the quality of its K–12 schools. Had the reform movement sparked by the *Risk* report led to real improvements in academic achievement, it would have had a dramatic impact on the already strong economy.

Squandered Potential

Consider a hypothetical scenario in which schools instituted truly effective reform in math and science instruction at the time of the *Risk* report. Had the reforms translated into achievement gains of 0.12 standard deviations a year for the remainder of the decade, with performance constant thereafter, scores of graduates would be one standard deviation higher going into the 1990s and the future. This would have required a Herculean effort, but was within the bounds of expectations. Recall that a 1989 meeting of the nation's governors set a goal of making U.S. students' performance in mathematics and science first in the world by 2000. An improvement of the more modest magnitude considered above would have put U.S. student performance in line with that of students in several European countries, but it still would not be at the top of the world rankings.

Such a path of improvement would not have had an immediately discernible effect on the economy, because new graduates are always a small portion of the labor force. However, the impact would mount over time. Figure 1 plots the potential GDP from 1990 to 2002 and adds an estimate of what the school reform sketched above would have implied for the economy. If past relationships between quality and growth held, GDP in the United States would have been more than 4 percent higher than was realized in 2002. The area between the two trend lines shows the "reform dividend," which totals to $2.5 trillion in the two decades after the release of *Risk*. With close to a $10.5 trillion economy, the unrealized gain for 2002 alone would have amounted to $450 billion, or more than the nation's total annual expenditure on K–12 public education.

Measuring Quality

A segment of the education policy community has argued against the current testing regime—either because it does not measure attributes they think are important or because the test outcomes are irrelevant. Nevertheless, the evidence reviewed above demonstrates that differences in performance on existing tests have significant implications for both individual and aggregate success. This is not to say that existing tests are the best possible. It just shows that the existing tests measure something real, something real enough that it has important ramifications for individuals and the economy.

That the acquisition of cognitive skill as measured by tests is important does not mean other aspects of education are unimportant. In fact, some research suggests that other dimensions of individual skill also influence economic performance. For instance, to the extent that aggregate growth is fueled by invention, creativity is likely to be important, and this may differ from measured cognitive skills. Currently it is in vogue to argue that schools must do more than simply teach reading, math, and science. Of course this is true. But such arguments do not deny that cognitive skills are important, and they do not say what should be done if one wants to enhance these other, currently unmeasured areas.

The question for the United States is how to create policies that boost achievement and thus economic growth. It would be easy, if we could improve quality simply by spending more or by reducing class size. But, unfortunately, evidence from both the United States and other countries shows that more school resources and smaller classes do not have much of an effect on how much a student learns in school, as measured by tests of achievement. The international math and science scores so important for growth rates are not related to variations in spending on education or other standard measures of school resources, such as pupil-teacher ratios. Similarly, within countries that participated in the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study, there is no systematic relationship between resources and student performance. Consequently, the policies following *Risk* failed in large part because they concentrated on simply adding more resources to the pot.

In other words, we need to look for ways other than mere increases in expenditure or reductions in class size if we are going to enhance the quality of our education system. A large body of evidence suggests that differences in quality between schools affect how students learn, but it will take creative policies to tap this potential. What students learn in school impacts their earnings later in life, their productivity in the work force, and, ultimately, the country's rate of growth. Over time, the cumulative impact of a high-quality education system can be dramatic.

–Eric A. Hanushek is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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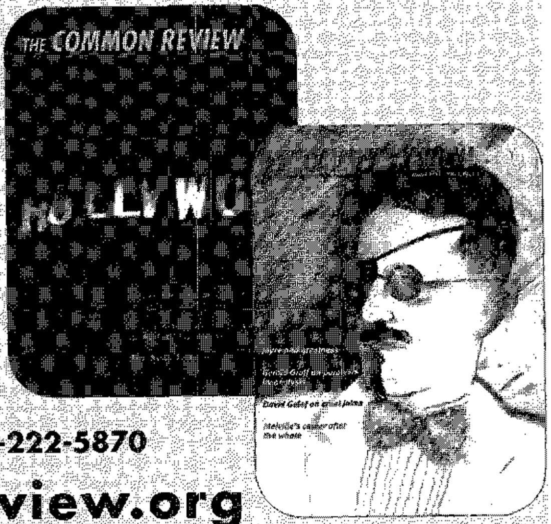

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Greek Lessons

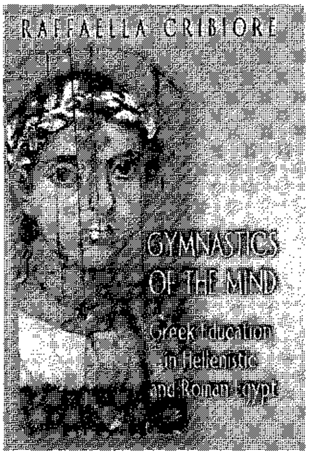
Discovering the elements of ancient education

Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt

by Raffaella Cribiore

Princeton University Press, 2001, $39.50; 288 pages.

Reviewed by Mary Lefkowitz



In Rome, toward the end of the 1st century C.E., Quintus Sulpicius Maximus, an 11-year-old boy, won honorable mention in a poetry contest by improvising some 43 verses in ancient Greek on a mythological theme. When shortly thereafter the talented boy succumbed to a disease, his devoted parents made sure that his verses were inscribed on a grave monument, which showed him in his toga holding a book-roll in his left hand. Too bad that Maximus, unlike his namesake the gladiator, will never be the subject of an award-winning film.

Nonetheless, we can learn something about ancient education from young Maximus's monument. Maximus, whose first language was presumably Latin, had learned to read Homer and other epic poets in Greek. He could compose in a metrical pattern that followed strict conventions. He had studied his mythology and knew how to construct an argument. Although the hexameters that young Maximus composed are not notable for their originality, either in style or content, his parents went to the great expense of having them preserved in stone. They were wealthy and proud of an achievement that would enable the boy to hold his head high among the lifeless shades in the Lower World. In ancient Rome, education was accessible only to those who could afford it, and only a small fraction of the population was able to read. Nonetheless, education mattered to the elite, then as now, and the purposes of an education were both cultural and practical.

We cannot discover from literary sources alone exactly how and why young Maximus was educated. Educated Greeks and Romans wrote much more about the final stages of rhetorical training than they did about the early stages of development. To learn about the practical details of elementary education, we need to turn to the students themselves and to their anxious parents. They recorded their thoughts in letters, which were written on papyrus. Since papyrus was preserved in the dry climate of Egypt, but lost in damper climates, most of what we know about elementary education comes from Greek settlements in that country. Almost all of the letters that have been preserved were written in Greek, even when the writers were Egyptians. They are difficult sources to work with. Fortunately, Raffaela Cribiore, associate curator of papyri at Columbia University and the author of a specialized study, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (1996), has the considerable expertise needed to make sense of the letters and bring them to life. Her new book, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, makes the complex and foreign world of ancient education accessible to nonclassicists, provided that they have at least some background knowledge of the ancient world.

Cribiore gives a detailed account of how children learned to write and read. Writing came first. Children copied letters and phrases, apparently without always understanding what they were copying. Then they learned to read by pronouncing nonsense syllables formed by combining consonants with vowels, such as *ba-be-bi*. Then they learned to decipher words and phrases, specially prepared for them by their teacher. Learning to read a sentence or paragraph required greater skill, even if it was written in a clear hand on a clean surface, because words in ancient texts were not separated from one another, lower-case letters were not used, and punctuation was at best sporadic. The accents and other diacritical marks we now use to write ancient Greek are comparatively late inventions. In antiquity even skilled readers needed to mark their texts. As Cribiore points out, the Greek word for reading, *anagignoskein*, literally means "know again." To read is to recognize and recollect.

If a student could learn to read, he or she would then copy texts and take dictation, most often short pithy phrases, including some from the great ancient poets. The Greeks used the letters of the alphabet plus three additional characters to represent numbers, and some students would learn at this stage the multiplication tables and fractions. One of the surprises in this book is that parents occasionally sent their daughters as well as their sons through these initial stages of education. There were no schools, at least in our sense of the word. *Schole*, the ancient word from which our word school derives, literally means "leisure." In other words, learning was available only for the rich, people with the wealth to afford free time. A small group of students met at the house of a teacher. As in a one-room schoolhouse, they were not divided into grades, and they were kept in line by the use of physical force. Most of the teachers (but not all) in the elementary stages were men. It was a trade that might be passed on from generation to generation in one family.

Only a relatively small number of students who learned to read advanced to the next stages of education, where they were taught by grammarians, teachers who were proficient in letters (*grammata*)—that is, literature. These teachers (and their students) were almost always male. They studied and memorized long passages from the works of the great Greek poets who had lived centuries before their own time. The most popular text, even in Egypt, was the *Iliad*, particularly Book 2, which contains the Catalogue of Ships, the list of all the heroes who came to Troy. The grammarians preferred Euripides to the other tragedians, because his language was simpler and his style more rhetorical. Their favorite among his dramas was a play that few people today have even heard of, the *Phoenician Women*. It contains some fine set speeches, along with a fast-moving account of the fate of Oedipus and his children.

By committing at least large portions of these texts to memory, students acquired a ready store of poetic phrases and vocabulary. They also learned how to structure a speech and present their arguments. They learned how to give a "true" account of a word (*etymologia*) by using puns to make it mean whatever would best suit their purposes. By memorizing the words of others, they learned how to structure the elements of their own compositions. It was this kind of education that the precocious young Maximus drew on when he composed his remarkable mythological "impersonation." It is not a curriculum that would appear to have encouraged exploration or originality, and it would not have won the approval of John Dewey. Nonetheless, as Cribiore points out, it instilled a lasting respect for hard work. The same learning, drill, and impersonation lie behind the work of the greatest poets of the time, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, to name just a very few.

–Mary Lefkowitz is a professor of classical studies at Wellesley College and the author of Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History.

Out of Balance

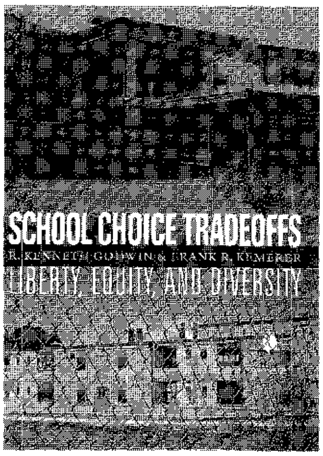
Mollifying factions is no way to improve schools

School Choice Tradeoffs: Liberty, Equity, and Diversity

By R. Kenneth Godwin and Frank R. Kemerer

University of Texas Press, 2002, $29.95; 315 pages.

Reviewed by John E. Brandl


SCHOOL CHOICE TRADEOFFS
R. KENNETH GODWIN & FRANK R. KEMERER
LIBERTY, EQUITY, AND DIVERSITY

America lacks a theory that would explain how its current system of public schooling could function at an acceptable level. Such a theory would describe how the several components of schooling—finances, administration, curriculum, teaching, and student characteristics—could come together in a way that yields educated children. This fundamental deficiency garners scant attention in much of the country because, in most suburbs and rural areas, parental guidance or social support enables students to reach adulthood passably educated. In the central cities it is a different story. There, at age 18—the age at which students are expected to exit the K–12 system—too many young people, particularly those of color, remain ill equipped for social life, parenting, employment, citizenship, and further education. There, the schools and the society have failed.

Plans for fixing the schools are regularly put forward. The one most often invoked, particularly by adults in the pay of the schools, is that adding funds would do the trick. This is not so much a theory—a theory would explain *why* more money would matter—as an assumption that the schools operate as machines: if they were fed sufficient numbers of dollars, they would yield good results. In this view, the level of spending matters because educators are deeply altruistic; devoting more money to hiring more such folks should help. However, this ignores the embarrassing reality that real per-pupil expenditures have more than tripled in the past four decades, without a corresponding rise in student achievement. Moreover, American government was founded on the expectation that, as James Madison put it, people are not "angels" and therefore need "precautions" to orient them toward socially productive behavior. The public school system lacks effective precautions.

Most academic research on education policy suffers from a similar implicit assumption: that the schools automatically use their resources well. The prevailing mode of research seeks to identify teaching or administrative practices that appear to have worked somewhere. Apparently efficacious practices are identified. This knowledge is then made available to educators in the expectation that they will snap up and implement the beneficial practices.

However, in general, the replication of effective practice has been spotty and disappointing. In fact, what researchers have most likely found (I fear without recognizing it) is not a set of approaches to education that will automatically be replicated, but rather that some visionary leaders—the John Deweys, David Weikerts, and Deborah Meiers of the world—can design and operate fine schools. How, then, can a free people induce its members—those who aren't angels or geniuses—to accomplish public purposes?

In this vein, one turns hopefully to *School Choice Tradeoffs*. The book emerged from the authors' study of choice programs in the schools of San Antonio, but it became an attempt at a sweeping synthesis of scholarly work on education policy, drawing on literature in philosophy, economics, political science, education, and law. There is much to admire here, but ultimately the book's organizing idea—that education policymaking consists of confronting tradeoffs—diverts attention from the efficacy question.

The authors admirably illuminate the education policy debate by resorting to the ideas of liberal political philosophers from John Locke to Amy Gutmann. A central argument of the book is that liberal political philosophy has been altered significantly by the introduction of more statist continental thinking. Locke's and John Stuart Mill's arguments for individual autonomy retain power today, but in the 20th century Dewey and others, influenced by Hegel and other German thinkers, put forward an arresting claim: that the proper education of children requires a role for government so large that it would have shocked their liberal predecessors. Locke, deeply suspicious of the state, placed the responsibility for educating children with their parents. Mill thought similarly; indeed, he argued that poor parents should receive financial assistance from the government in order to afford the type of education they favor for their children.

Dewey, by contrast, saw the public schools as a benevolent force with a responsibility to erode the prejudices and parochialisms children acquire from their parents. Gutmann, a contemporary political philosopher, shares Dewey's concern that parents, particularly religious ones, will indoctrinate children with irrationality and intolerance, making them ill suited for life in a democratic society. Thus arises the tradeoff that most concerns Godwin and Kemerer: individual autonomy and cultural pluralism versus social cohesion and a societal duty to rescue children from obscurantism. They subtly present and discuss this apparent conundrum.

Godwin and Kemerer next move to recount how courts have negotiated that tradeoff. They describe a period in the past century when individual and parental autonomy was usually upheld, followed (beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education*) by a period in which the courts, in the name of equal opportunity, considerably limited the ability of parents to control where and with whom their children would be educated. Very recently the Supreme Court has given parents more say in the education of their children. The authors' analysis anticipates the Supreme Court's decision in *Zelman*, released after this book's publication, which found the Cleveland voucher program constitutional.

A strength—a formidable policy proposal—as well as the weakness of the book are found in the final chapter, in which the authors first discuss the contending political positions and concomitant tradeoffs regarding vouchers, then propose a voucher program they have planned in exceptional detail. The tradeoffs are variations on the fundamental fissure Godwin and Kemerer identify in liberal political philosophy: individual autonomy versus public accountability; religious freedom versus separation of church and state; cultural diversity versus coherent national values. They seek an "Archimedean point" at which these several considerations are in balance.

But the authors don't seem to have decided whether they are analyzing conflicting interests or offering a compelling idea—a theory—which, if applied to schooling, would yield better-educated youngsters. Juggling tradeoffs is a description of normal politics, but it doesn't consider the power of ideas. Appeasing opposing groups can leave unanswered the question of how to organize schooling so that children actually get educated.

In construing policymaking as the balancing of interests, Godwin and Kemerer eschew the power of an alternative understanding of policymaking, namely the design of institutions so that people are oriented to accomplish public purposes. In that understanding, a policy reflects a theory of how individuals and organizations act. Accomplishing education policy by mollifying factions is unlikely to raise student achievement. However, underlying the idea of vouchers are theories that competition properly structured can foster innovation and efficiency, and that choice can facilitate the formation and flourishing of nurturing communities. Perhaps those theories will ultimately be shown to be wrong. If so, voucher advocates will never prevail. They have other arguments on their side—vouchers would be fair because they would end double taxation, and vouchers would be American because they would respect individual autonomy. But those arguments will not persuade opponents, who will continue to see them as special pleading. A powerful theory has a chance of changing minds.

–John E. Brandl is a professor of public affairs at the University of Minnesota.

education matters to me

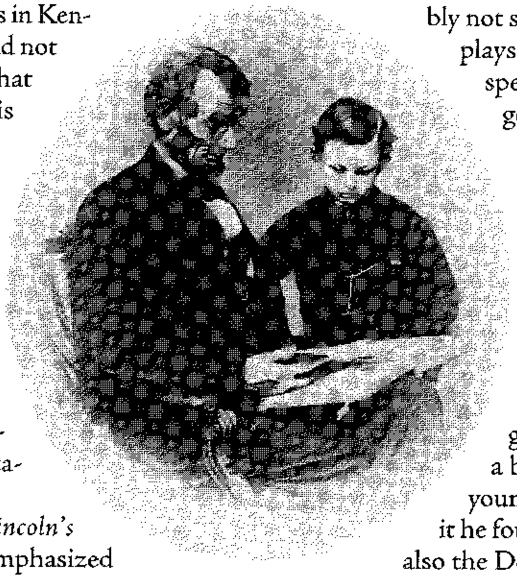
by WILLIAM LEE MILLER

Honest Abe

Lincoln taught himself the three R's—and more

Where did Abraham Lincoln get his moral compass? He certainly did not have parents like those of John Quincy Adams. There was no equivalent of Abigail Adams, reading great history books to her young son and teaching him patriotic poems. The poetry that Lincoln could quote (of which there was quite a bit) he had learned on his own.

He surely did not learn much from his father. Tom Lincoln did not understand or support his extraordinary son; he disapproved of Abe's constant reading and made him go to work.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE LINCOLN MUSEUM

Lincoln attended five one-room schools in Kentucky and Illinois. Of his teachers, he could not say, "All that I have become I owe to that man"—as James Madison said about his tutor Donald Robinson. There was, Lincoln wrote, "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education" in the cluster of cabins in the Indiana woods called Little Pigeon Creek.

Did he receive instruction in morals from the Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church? His father, stepmother, and sister joined the church—but not Abraham. Instead, the 15-year-old boy mimicked the sermons with his own presentations from a tree stump.

One reviewer of my biography, *Lincoln's Virtues,* suggested that I should have emphasized the importance of *women*—of his mother and stepmother. Some who knew Nancy Hanks said that she was more intellectually able than her husband. About Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, Mark E. Neely Jr., in his excellent short book *The Last Best Hope of Earth,* wrote, "She apparently came to like Lincoln better than her own progeny, and he apparently came to like her better than he liked his own father." Perhaps these two women played a strong role in the initial shaping of Abraham Lincoln. But still, the two mothers, each unable to sign her name, do not appear to have mentored the able boy so much as they encouraged his own self-improving bent.

Nothing was more important in shaping Lincoln than the printing press.

Truth is, nothing was more important in shaping Lincoln than the printing press. Only a few texts made their way to the newly formed little settlements in the western woods, and on the whole they tended to be publications with some lasting merit. Lincoln's knowledge of the Bible was probably not surpassed by an American statesman. The plays—particularly the tragedies—of Shakespeare were read first in snippets in pedagogical readers. Those readers—like Scott's *Lessons in Elocution*—had selections from eminent writers across the past of English and classical literature, all chosen with an unembarrassed attention to moral development.

There was American history, too: Parson Weems's famous life of Washington, William Grimshaw's *History of the United States.* You might not think an energetic teenager would be much interested in a book called *Revised Statutes of Indiana,* but young Lincoln borrowed it from a neighbor. In it he found not only technical legal materials, but also the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In New Salem he read and loved and memorized poems by Robert Burns.

From these disciplined beginnings sprouted a lifetime of self-education: teaching himself grammar when he was 23; teaching himself how to be a surveyor; borrowing Blackstone's law dictionary and teaching himself to be a lawyer. As president, he got books on military science from the Library of Congress so he could deal with the generals.

These habits of intense study appear in his speeches. His greatest speeches are short, compressed, and eloquent. But he also gave longer speeches, and often their preparation included arduous historical research: You would have a hard time composing a better summary of early American history than the first half of the Cooper Institute Address.

–William Lee Miller is the author of Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography *(Knopf, 2002).*

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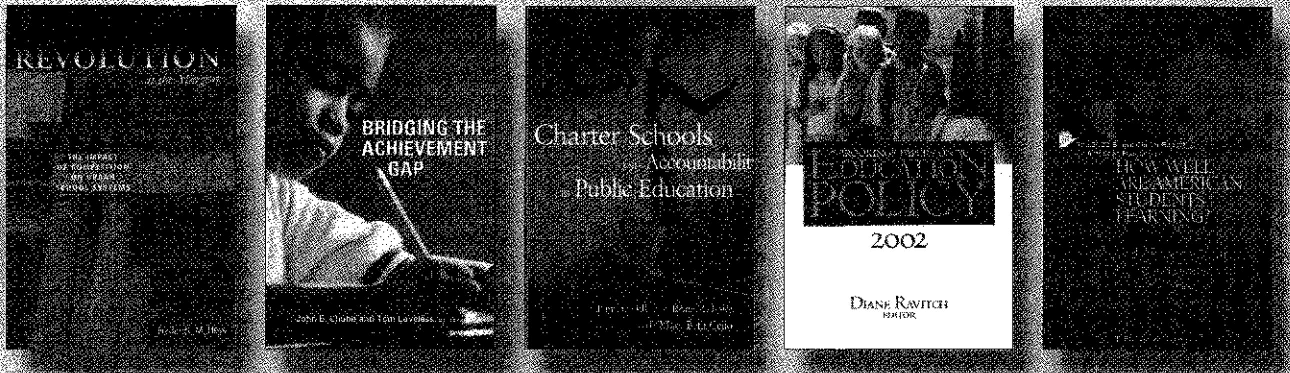
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an assessment by the koret task force on k–12 education

Our Schools & Our Future

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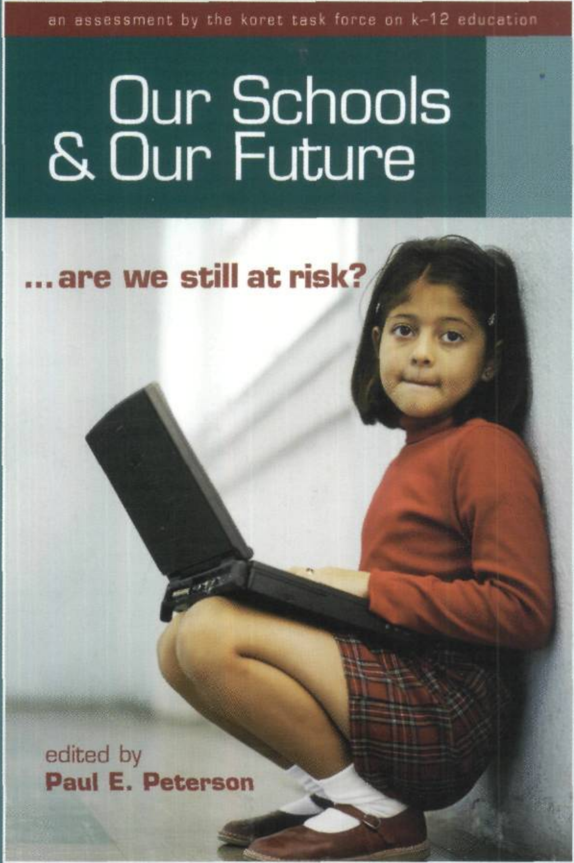

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